スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❼

がんばれ死霊術士（ネクロマンサー）

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 7

Go For It, Necromancer!

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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Shadow Menace

Editor's note: this story was adapted into one of the OVA's

"Did you understand!? Do you realize how dire this situation is!?"

Naga and I both gave a deep, simultaneous nod to the messenger, who spoke with a look of utmost gravity on his face.

"It certainly doesn't seem like we have time to just sit around leisurely," I said.

"If you think so, then please stop ordering seconds of the daily special!" the young messenger shrieked, looking as if he were about to burst into tears. He was a man with no peace in his soul.

Naga, sitting across the table, drained her mug in one go with a sharp flick of her wrist. "Hmph. How green. If you're going to get rattled by the scale of the situation, you still have a long way to go." As she spoke, she swept her hair back with a dramatic flourish.

"I'm not asking you to get rattled! I'm telling you to hurry up! Me!" he screamed, tears actually welling in his eyes. "Anyway! As quickly as possible, the Sha—"

He stopped himself there. Having apparently finally come to his senses, he suddenly lowered his voice as if wary of his surroundings. "Anyway, regarding the 'Mirror' matter—I'm counting on you."

"I get it... it really might not be the time to be eating slowly," I said. I left more than a third of my meal sitting there and pushed my chair back with a clatter. Placing a hand firmly on his shoulder with a strong nod, I added, "I've got it—so, please take care of the bill here."

Among the mages in the history of sorcery who were graced with the title "The Great," the name Shazard Lugandi stood out. Because he lacked flashy episodes, his public recognition was low compared to the legendary Lei Magnus, the modern Great Sage, or Rezo the Red Priest; however, among mages, there was no one who did not know his name.

He was a sorcerer active about four hundred years ago who demonstrated his genius

in the development of magical artifacts. After all, nearly half the items currently lined up in magic shops—though with some improvements or added variations—were his inventions. That alone should tell you the extent of his talent. Because he possessed clear, recorded achievements, there were quite a few mages who evaluated him more highly than even Lei Magnus or the Red Priest.

...Of course, being a famous mage from the distant past, various fishy rumors followed him. For instance, stories ranged from him being the author of the legendary book, the *Claire Bible*, to him having survived for over four hundred years and being the one who actually gave the legendary "Sword of Light" to the hero when Sairag was destroyed by a magic beast a century ago.

Among those many fishy rumors was one concerning the "Shadow Mirror." Originally developed by him for use against monster-kind, it was a device that, by reflecting an opponent, created a "Shadow"—a being with the exact same abilities (not just physical, but technical and intellectual experience) but with a completely inverted personality.

In short, if you reflected a monster in it, you could create a "Shadow" that was an ally to humans and an enemy to monsters, possessing the same combat power as the original. However, in the end, Shazard never released it to the world and reportedly sealed it away somewhere. The reason went without saying. With just this one mirror, conquering the world would be a simple task. The mirror didn't turn evil into holy; it simply inverted attributes. As long as an "enemy" existed, you could reflect them to create an "ally" with the same power—infinitely.

—But as a practical matter, copying even an opponent's experience was something impossible even with modern magical technology. It was hard to believe a mage from four hundred years ago could have pulled it off, no matter how much of a genius he was. Furthermore, if the story were true, where on earth did rumors of a tool that never entered the world come from?

Because of all that, the story was naturally treated as a mere rumor. That is, until very recently, when a certain mage discovered old records. He reported it to the Sorcerers' Guild, and just as the Guild was about to organize an investigation team—related documents and equipment were swept away by someone.

The suspect’s name surfaced immediately: Lagan, a mage who held the position of Vice-Councilor of that very Guild. He vanished completely the day after the incident. It was as if he were shouting, "I did it!" His aim was obvious. He intended to get the mirror before the Guild—and it wasn't hard to imagine what he planned to do with it. To stop his ambition, the Sorcerers' Guild took action, and I and Naga, who happened

to be nearby, were asked to cooperate.

"Hmph. But with this, the punchline is pretty much predictable," Naga muttered in a bored tone through her fatigue.

We were climbing a beast path on a nameless mountain under the dazzling afternoon sun. Our destination, needless to say, was the resting place of the "Shadow Mirror." Lagan had certainly stolen all the materials regarding the mirror, but he couldn't steal the memories of the people who had read them. The Guild synthesized those fragments of memory, located the mirror's resting place, and sent the main force along with a mobile detached unit like us.

"Well, it does sound fake," I replied with a small nod.

This sort of thing was common with stories involving legends. You couldn't let your guard down just because documents were found. There was a high possibility it was a fabrication by some eccentric person.

"But whether the 'Shadow Mirror' exists or not, I don't care about that."

"...And why is that?"

In response to Naga's question, I held up my right index finger. "Think about it. Our request from the Guild this time as a detached unit is to 'capture or destroy the mirror, or capture/subjugate Lagan before he obtains it.' ...Sure, if the mirror doesn't exist, we can't snatch it or break it, but in that case, we can still knock Lagan's lights out. In other words—if we take down that Lagan guy faster than the main force or the other units, the success reward of two hundred gold coins is ours!"

"Hmph! I see!"

Perhaps energized by the logic, Naga’s eyes sparkled, and she swept her cloak out for no reason. "In that case, we’ll just charge straight ahead, defeat that mage quickly, and make the reward ours! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"...Wa... wait..."

It was then that a pained groan reached our ears from deep within the bushes to the side.

"Who's there!?"

In response to my voice, a man staggered out from the thicket. He was dressed like a mage, but he was covered in mud and blood, in a truly tattered state. He collapsed as

if falling and looked up at us.

"...Y-you guys are chasing Lagan too, right...?"

—Since he said "you guys too," it meant this man was also a member of a detached unit requested by the Guild, just like us.

"...Y-you should turn back... damn it... he's got beastmen with him... it's impossible with just two people..."

"Beastmen!?" I asked, repeating his words.

He grimaced in pain. "...Yeah... a lot of them, too... there were five of us, but in the end, I'm the only one who made it..."

"Hmm."

"Well, I guess that’s that."

"Hey-hey-hey-hey-hey!" He raised his voice in a panic as we simply let his words slide and started walking again.

"Is there something else?" I asked.

"Not 'is there something else'! I'm telling you it's impossible with just two people!"

As he screamed half in desperation, I waved my hand dismissively. "It’s fine, it’s fine. I don't mean to brag, but beastmen aren't even a match for us, even if they come by the dozen."

The man was momentarily speechless at my casual response. "...W-wait! If possible... could you take me to the village at the foot of the mountain?"

...Aha... I see. As if I'd fall for that.

"I refuse," I stated flatly.

The man wore a stunned expression for a moment, but then a low chuckle escaped him. He stood up unsteadily and pointed a finger sharply at us.

"I thought I'd pretend to be an injured man, wait for you to lower your guard and offer a shoulder, then cut you down... Impressive. To think you saw through the fact that I am one of Lord Lagan's men!"

"...Huh? Is that so?" I said, my voice unintentionally vacant. "...No... I just thought you were trying to hold us back out of spite because you couldn't get the two hundred gold coins for yourselves..."

The man froze, finger still pointed. "...You hadn't realized...? Could it be...?"

"...Yep." I gave a slow, rhythmic nod.

An awkward silence hung between us for a moment.

"...W-well, anyway..." He cleared his throat lightly and regained his composure. "I was supposed to act as a distraction for any pursuers, but regardless of how it happened, now that my identity is out, there's no choice! Since it’s come to this, I’ll take you down with my own hands!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You certainly give me a good laugh! You think you can defeat Naga the White Serpent and one other person all by yourself!?"

...What do you mean, "one other person"? Like I'm just an extra?

"I can!" the man said in a confident tone before I could retort. "It's true that the injury was a lie... but it's also true that there are beastmen under Lord Lagan's command!"

"No way! Then you're...!?"

"Exactly! Witness my true form!"

Power surged through the man's body as he gave a wolf-like howl—

"I don't want to see it!"

WHAM!

The stone I threw—roughly the size of a baby’s head—hit the man square in the skull. Without even time to scream, he toppled over on the spot.

—Of course, to me, Lina Inverse, a warrior and a beautiful genius sorceress, beastmen were no threat. However, I felt no obligation to stand around leisurely watching an opponent take their time to power up.

"Hmph... it seems the enemy has prepared somewhat," Naga said, sweeping her hair back.

I gave a nod. "True. But the fact that this guy appeared before us means..."

She took a short breath, realizing what I was about to say.

"Right. Currently, we’re in the lead!"

"Which means..."

"If we keep going like this, those two hundred gold coins are ours!" I shouted, pumping

my fist with all my might.

And so, the battle began. As the two of us proceeded, swarms of beastmen attacked one after another. The closer we got to the place where the mirror reportedly slept, the fiercer the enemy attacks became. But even they were no match for the two hundred gold coins dancing before our eyes. We knocked down the beastmen, knocked down some trees in the process, and even started a small forest fire, but setting the details aside, the two of us finally reached the location in question.

There was a cave opening in the mountain valley. Nearby, a giant rock lay split in two. Likely, Lagan or the beastmen had used a spell to smash through whatever had been blocking the entrance.

"—Finally—"

I nodded at Naga's murmur. Whether the Shadow Mirror was here or not, it was almost certain that the two hundred gold coins—I mean, Lagan—was inside.

We stepped into the depths of the cave. The smell of the air—damp, or rather, wet—testified to the fact that this cave had been completely isolated from the outside world for a long time. Not even glowing moss grew here; the inside was literal, absolute darkness. Even peering into the depths, not a sliver of light was visible. At this rate, we wouldn't even be able to walk.

"Light!"

I had no choice but to light a magical flame at the tip of my short sword's scabbard and hold it up in my left hand. There was a high risk of being spotted by the enemy, but well, we'd deal with that when it happened.

The two of us proceeded deeper into the wet, slippery cave. Inside the darkness, only time seemed to flow. The cave was just one endless path. There wasn't even a sign of an enemy.

—Eventually—just as I was getting bored of walking—I spotted a faint light beyond the darkness.

"—Is that—!?"

Naga and I exchanged glances, gave a simultaneous nod, and picked up the pace toward the light. Before long, we suddenly emerged into an open area. It was a space like a small dome. The area, large enough to fit a small house, was clearly man-made. Inside the room, illuminated by several magical lights, were five or six beastmen and one man in mage's robes. He was an elderly man wrapped in a black robe, his hair

streaked with white. He was quite a ruggedly handsome man, but a flicker of condescending light hid in his eyes.

Most likely—Lagan.

"...Hmph... the Guild's dogs have arrived already? Faster than I thought—but regardless, it's too late..."

In the hand of the speaking mage was a single mirror, shining with a silver light.

"The Shadow Mirror!?" I cried out.

It was about the size of an ordinary wall mirror. A round mirror large enough to reflect one from the shoulders up if stood before it. The border around the mirror was likely magical silver, etched with complex patterns as if thin snakes were entwined. The slightly purplish mirror surface reflected the magical light, giving off a slick luster.

No way—it actually existed!? Controlling my inner agitation, I feigned composure. "There's no guarantee that's the real thing."

"Exactly," Lagan admitted easily, despite my attempt to rattle him. "That's why I was waiting like this. For you to arrive. Now I can confirm it. Whether the mirror is the real thing or not!"

Before he even finished speaking, Lagan turned the mirror toward the two of us! The surface of the mirror emitted a greasy glow, and Lagan’s mouth began to weave a strange incantation.

I don't even understand why Naga and I didn't move. Did I believe the mirror was a fake? Or did I want to see it activate if it were real? Our reflections in the mirror distorted violently for an instant—

Fshhhhhhhhhh!

The moment Lagan finished the spell, the mirror blew out a black mist. Eventually, after the mist settled—

"...H-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I did it! I've done it! I have obtained the ultimate power! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Hearing Lagan’s loud laughter, Naga and I could only stare blankly at the other pair of "us" standing before our eyes. The legend was real.

The "Shadows" looked exactly like us. Height, features, skin and hair color, even what they were wearing. If we stood side by side, it would be impossible to find a difference in appearance. That meant, just as the legend said, their knowledge and

experience were probably at the same level as ours.

However, the decisive difference was—since we were enemies to Lagan, the "Shadows" with the inverted personality were Lagan's allies—meaning, they were our enemies.

—I was careless. To think—

Even as I gnashed my teeth inwardly, it was too late. Lagan's triumphant voice echoed in the ears of the standing Naga and me.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh... Now! 'Shadows'! Defeat those people before you! Fight! Against yourselves!"

At Lagan's command, my "Shadow" moved! I instinctively braced myself. But! In the next moment, a chill unlike anything I had ever felt in my life ran through my entire body! To my horror—my "Shadow" suddenly knelt on the spot, clasped her hands in front of her chest, and with stars practically appearing in her eyes, said this to me:

"Please, let's talk this out."

A silence deeper than the abyss dominated the room.

".....Hey....."

Lagan's raspy voice was the one that finally broke it. "...I said 'fight'..."

"Fighting is such a barbaric thing!" My "Shadow" shook her head back and forth in a maidenly, trembling fashion. "Even if they are enemies, they are fellow human beings! There are no truly bad people in this world! I'm sure we can understand each other if we just talk!"

...Ugh...

"Eeeeeeeeeeeek!"

Unable to bear the indescribable itchiness crawling over my skin, I screamed and started clawing at my body. To think—to think that a maidenly, humanitarian version of myself could be this terrifying! Beside me, I saw Naga's "Shadow," who was apparently ashamed of her own costume, covering herself with her cloak and drawing circles on the floor with her finger while blushing. The real Naga was face-down on the floor, twitching.

"...Th-the 'Shadow Mirror' is terrifying! ...It truly deserves the name of an ultimate weapon!" I said, taking care not to look directly at my own "Shadow."

"...No... how do I put it... I feel like... it's not supposed to be like this... personally..."

Lagan muttered, half-stunned.

"W-what should we do, Mr. Lagan?" a beastman asked with a bewildered face.

Lagan looked equally bewildered. "Even if you ask me what to do... what am I supposed to do... about this situation..."

Silence fell once more. I scratched my body, Naga kept twitching, and Lagan stared blankly into space.

"—For now—Let's run away."

After a while, Lagan muttered those words. Well, it was a reasonable course of action. The "Shadow Mirror" produced a "Shadow" with the same ability and inverted personality—creating countless pacifists against an enemy attacking with bare hostility wouldn't accomplish anything. I felt like I finally understood the true reason why the creator, Shazard Lugandi, had sealed this mirror. Too good to destroy, but too embarrassing to release to the world.

At any rate, now that Lagan realized the "Shadow Mirror" wouldn't be a trump card against the Guild's pursuers, flight was his only remaining option.

"Since that's decided, there's no reason to linger! Let's get out of here!"

"...Um... what about these guys..."

"Leave them!" Lagan snapped at the beastman who had glanced back at us and the "Shadows." He and the group of beastmen then dashed past Naga and sprinted toward the exit.

"Y-you won't get away!"

Resisting the itchiness, I spun around to give chase, but something suddenly latched onto my leg! Carelessly, I looked back—and ended up making direct eye contact with my "Shadow" as she looked up at me with pleading, tear-filled eyes!

Cringe-cringe-cringe-cringe-cringe!

I felt like I could actually hear the sound of goosebumps erupting all over my body.

"Please wait! What do you intend to do to Lord Lagan!?"

...I suppressed the urge to scream and thought desperately. Of course, the answer to what I'd do once I caught him was decided: I'd beat him down and hand him over to the Guild. But if I said that honestly, the "Shadow" would definitely try to stop me. And in the most peaceful way possible. If she clung to me like this and whispered into

my ear endlessly about human rights and dialogue, I'd definitely have nightmares.

Darn it! Since it's come to this, I had no choice but to use my last resort, even though I didn't really want to!

"—I understand. Let's talk." I said solemnly, wearing a look of agreement. Secret technique: The "Pretend-to-be-Reasonable-and-Manipulate-Them-with-Smooth-Talk" Attack!

"Really!?" My "Shadow's" face lit up innocently.

"But listen. Lagan stole materials from the Guild and plotted to keep that 'Shadow Mirror' all to himself."

"No way...!"

"It's true. As proof, the Guild people should be arriving soon. If you ask them, you'll see. Regardless, he has to atone for the crimes he committed."

"...But..." My "Shadow" held both fists to her mouth, fidgeting and trembling.

...I sometimes do this as a joke or a front myself... but seeing it from a calm, outsider perspective, it was pretty creepy. Resisting the shivers running down my spine again, I pressed on.

"I know you're Lagan's ally. But—no, because of that, you have a duty to advise him to atone for his crimes! It must be hard, but for his sake—"

At the lines I spat out while enduring the "itchiness," my "Shadow" thought for a moment—

"—You're... right..." she said in a quiet but firm tone, nodding with determination.

Al-fright! With this, I could at least avoid being clung to and lectured!

"Since that's settled, let's chase them immediately! Come on! Naga! You stop twitching too!" I thought about kicking her awake, but fearing the possibility of starting a lecture from the "Shadows," I shook her instead.

"...I... I got it..." Naga replied in a raspy voice, somehow picking herself up.

"...Um..."

A hesitant voice from behind stopped us just as we were about to turn and chase Lagan. Looking back warily, there stood Naga's "Shadow," acting shy. She looked away from us, face red, fidgeting.

"May I come with you...? Being alone in a place like this... I'm... scared..."

—It goes without saying that Naga and I both instinctively winced.

"...W... what are we going to do, Lina? About them..." Naga whispered as we ran through the dark cave toward the exit, making sure the "Shadows" behind us couldn't hear.

"...What do you mean, 'what are we going to do'... even if you ask me..." It was true; having these things follow us around forever would be disastrous for our mental health.

"...In this case, we have no choice but to break the 'Mirror'..." I said after a moment's thought. "The 'Shadows' should disappear if the mirror is gone. Since Lagan has the mirror, we'll smash it in the confusion of capturing him!"

"...Seems like the only way..." Naga replied firmly in a low voice.

Eventually, the four of us cleared the cave and stepped outside. Looking around, all we could see was a stretch of green. Lagan and the others were already gone. ...Darn it. We were pulled away while dealing with the "Shadows" in the cave.

But we couldn't just give up here. Otherwise, we'd lose the two hundred gold coins and leave these "Shadows" roaming free. We had to avoid that at all costs. We had to find Lagan and his group, but even if we tried to search from the air using flight magic, the trees were so thick that visibility was poor...

Just as I was thinking that—

BOOM!

An unmistakable explosion shook the air. Hurriedly scanning the area, I saw a single trail of black smoke drifting through the forest. So—Lagan's group had run into one of the Guild's other detached units!

"That way!"

Even without hearing my voice, the group began running in that direction.

"...D... damn it!" Lagan muttered, gasping for breath. For some reason, he was still clutching the Shadow Mirror as if it were precious. Around him, five or six mages and beastmen lay groaning on the ground. They had won the battle, but it looked like Lagan's group had lost several beastmen.

But this was as far as they’d go!

"Lord Lagan!"

Lagan flinched and spun around at the voice from the side. Standing there, of course, were us—including the two "Shadows."

"I-impossible! Why are the 'Shadows' on your side!?" he cried out in shock.

As if in response, my "Shadow" stepped forward. "Please, Lord Lagan! Stop... stop doing these terrifying things! ...I certainly respect and love you, but a crime is still a crime. Please. Please throw down your weapon!"

At the "Shadow's" words, Lagan turned a gaze toward me as if looking at a different species. "...If a 'Shadow' with an inverted personality is like this... what kind of personality do you have!?"

"Shut up!" I snapped.

Lagan wore a cramped smile unique to those who were cornered. "Hmph... fine... but no matter who comes, I will surely escape! That's exactly why I brought this mirror! If I create 'Shadows' of my opponents, they may not be useful in combat, but they can be used as decoys!"

"Lord Lagan!" the "Shadows" of Naga and me shouted in unison.

But it was clear that Lagan had no intention of listening. He pointed sharply at the four of us. "Go! Beastmen!"

"Hyah!"

"If it’s come to this, I’m going all out!"

"Waaahhhhh..."

Shouting various things, the beastmen charged at us, more than half of them acting out of desperation. At that moment, the two "Shadows" moved! With a single motion, they leaped back and began trembling behind a nearby tree trunk!

...How... pathetic... even though I hadn't counted on them to begin with...

Well, at any rate, there were four enemy beastmen. Honestly, they were no match! However, if we finished off the beastmen first and Lagan surrendered, we’d lose the chance to smash the mirror. I chanted a spell and charged toward the beastmen!

"Fool! To think you'd come to us yourself!" One of the beastmen shouted and raised his

sword.

—It happened at the same time. I made a large leap to the side, and Naga behind me released her spell.

"Ice Arrow!"

"...Wh-...!?"

Hearing Naga's voice and the beastmen's screams behind me, I released my spell toward Lagan!

"Blue Fiend Blast!"
"Gwah!"

His carelessness was his downfall. He took the shockwave of blue light I released head-on and was blown back. And—

SHATTER!

The "Shadow Mirror," having left his hand, slammed into the trees and smashed into pieces with a sharp sound. —It was over. Finally. ...Phew...

I took a long breath—

"...Well, it was unavoidable, but I really don't approve of violence..."

Twitch!

I froze at the voice from behind. Of course, I knew whose voice it was. I knew, but—I didn't want to admit it. I didn't want to admit it, but—

Turning around warily, my gaze fell upon the "Shadows" of Naga and me peeking their heads out from behind the tree trunk.

And so, the Shadow Mirror was smashed to pieces, and after handing Lagan over to the Guild, Naga and I successfully received the reward of two hundred gold coins. Happy ending.

.....

...No... well... even though the mirror was broken, the "Shadows" didn't disappear, and of course, no one knew why. I don't really want to talk about what happened to the "Shadows" after that...

—If you happen to see a chestnut-haired female mage in a certain town who is

dedicated to defending human rights, or a black-haired female mage who is working to protect traditional culture—please just pretend you didn't see them.

(Shadow Menace: End)

Inverse Love Classroom

It was a perfectly ordinary job.

Escorting some rich brat—let's call him "Brat Number One"—from Town A to Town B. That was all there was to it.

The profit was decent enough, but the excitement factor was practically zero.

The only reason Naga and I took on such a tedious, utterly boring task was purely because we were lured in by the size of the reward.

When a group of crooked bandits stood in our way on the highway, it was just the same old story for Naga and me.

Truly, it was a textbook, run-of-the-mill job.

Yes—at least, until that moment.

"Two women and one man... a trip with a flower in each hand, eh!? You've got it pretty good, don't you!? Well!?"

Threatened by the leader of the bandits, Lester began to tremble piteously.

...Good grief... what a pathetic sight.

This was Lester, the "Rich Brat Number One" Naga and I were escorting this time.

Even calling him a "boy" felt a bit off, as he was likely older than either Naga or me. He was a black-haired, reasonably handsome fellow, but there was something unsophisticated about him.

More importantly, even though Naga and I were standing our ground perfectly calmly, I really wished he would stop flailing around in such a panic all by himself. It made me feel pathetic just watching him.

...Well... then again, confidence without the strength to back it up is its own kind of trouble...

Regardless, protecting him was our job. We just had to clean up these bandit nobodies and keep moving!

"Yeah, yeah. People who can only bully the weak shouldn't talk so big."

"Wh... what did you say!?"

At my dismissive words, the bandit boss’s face flushed with genuine rage.

"Fine! I thought I'd let you go if you behaved, but if that's how you're going to be, I won't show any mercy!"

With that, he drew his sword with a sharp ring.

Of course, that was exactly what I wanted.

As Lina Inverse, a swordsman and genius sorceress, I didn't recall ever falling so low that I needed mercy from the likes of a bandit.

I drew my short sword from my hip and began to murmur a spell under my breath.

"Get them!"

"Yeah!"

At the man's command, the bandits charged toward us, weapons in hand.

—Too slow.

"Dill Brand!"

BOOM!

With one shot of my preemptive spell, about a third of them were blown away.

The bandits stumbled for a moment.

"Dammit! Don't flinch! Finish them before she can cast the next spell!"

At the boss's shouting, the bandits regained their movement.

I murmured a spell while easily parrying the blade of one man who slashed at me with my short sword.

He had a fair amount of power, but his technique and speed were nonexistent.

Behind me, Naga was freezing the bandits solid with her *Freeze Arrow*.

And then, my second spell was complete!

"Flare Arrow!"

F-WHOOOSH!

Five or six of the bandits collapsed like puppets.

Only a few of them were left.

However, when people like this are pushed into a disadvantageous situation, the kind of trick they'll pull is naturally predictable.

"Don't move!"

At the sound of the voice, Naga and I looked over to see Lester held in a headlock by one of the bandits!

"Listen! If you so much as move—!"

"Damu Brass!"

KABOOM!

Before the bandit could even finish his cliché threat, the spell Naga released blew both the bandit and Lester away.

"Oh. He flew pretty well today."

I placed my palm over my eyes, speaking in a carefree tone.

Lately, I had been trying not to nag Naga too much, even when she got other people caught in the crossfire.

I felt like I was becoming a better person—or perhaps my heart was just growing larger.

...Then again, maybe it wasn't something like that at all...

Anyway, Naga and I repelled the bandits and safely—well, sort of—protected Lester.

—Yes.

Up until this point, it had been a normal job, no different from usual. Up until this point...

"...Lina..."

That night—

Lester came down from his room on the second floor of the inn to the tavern and eatery on the first floor when the night was already quite late.

Naturally, by this hour, the locals who had come for a drink had returned home, and most of the guests had retired to their rooms to recover from the day's fatigue; there were only a handful of customers left besides me.

Naga was probably fast asleep in her own room by now.

—As for why I was in a place like this at such an hour—

During dinner, Lester had whispered secretly into my ear.

—Please come to this spot tonight, just you. I have something to talk to you about.—

It seemed rather complicated, but I couldn't exactly ignore it. I thought maybe there was a chance he'd say, "You're cute, so keep this a secret from Naga, but I'll double your request fee."

...Probably not... usually...

Anyway, he glanced around restlessly before taking a seat across from me at the table.

He sat down, but he did nothing but fidget strangely, making no move to start the conversation.

"...So? What do you want to talk about?"

The moment I finally prompted him—

Lester’s face suddenly turned bright red, and he began to fidget even more than before!

...C-could this be...!?

Was this that "romance" thing I often heard about in folk tales!?

"...A-actually... I... I don't know how to say this..."

As he spoke, he kept throwing fleeting, stolen glances my way.

...T-this reaction was definitely it...

Well, Lester was certainly a man, and I supposed it wasn't impossible for his heart to be moved by having a lovely young girl nearby...

"...Li... Lina!"

Flushing deep red, he leaned over the table as if he had made up his mind.

"...W-what!?"

I instinctively pulled back a little.

"What kind of person is Naga!?"

THUD.

I toppled over sideways, chair and all.

"...Y-you don't mean... you...!?"

Once I managed to recover and sit back down, I asked him. Lester gave a small nod.

"...She's wonderful, isn't she... a woman like her..."

He spoke in a dream-like tone.

"...Y-you think so...?"

I spoke with a twitching voice.

"I do... that... that sparkle she has... her effortless sense of style..."

"....."

I was now completely speechless.

How was I supposed to comment to someone who used an expression like "effortless sense of style" for Naga without a hint of shame?

"Please! I want to know more about her! Tell me! What kind of person is Naga!?"

"...She's that kind of person..."

I gave the most concise explanation possible to Lester, who was asking with an incredibly serious expression.

"...I see... that kind of person... Just as I thought..."

For some reason, Lester seemed satisfied.

...Just what on earth were you thinking she was like...?

I felt like I didn't want to know...

"Please, Lina."

He looked me straight in the eye and said,

"I want to somehow convey my feelings to her... to Naga! Please... won't you help me!?"

He suddenly started making selfish demands.

What kind of tragedy was this that I had to help form a couple with such questionable taste!?

However, if I said that to his face, the request fee might decrease... I mean, I couldn't bear to hurt his feelings.

I maintained a studiously serious expression.

"...Listen, Lester, if you're serious, you should do it yourself—"

"I'll give you fifty gold coins as a reward..."

"Leave it to me!"

I puffed out my chest.

"I might not look it, but I'm quite something when it comes to romance! Why, back in my hometown, there was a time they used to call me 'Lina the Red Thread Cutter'!"

"...Um... isn't that maybe an insult...?"

"Anyway! Leave this sort of thing to me! I have a brilliant idea."

"What kind of idea!?"

"I'll put Naga to sleep with a *Sleeping* spell, and then you... hee-hee-hee."

"What are you saying!?"

Lester shouted in earnest at my innocent joke.

"M-my feelings for her aren't like that! How should I put it... it's something... spiritual!"

"...Sp-Spiritual!?"

The word was so utterly unsuited for Naga that I couldn't help but raise my voice.

Regardless, Lester continued with a dream-like look and tone.

"Yes... today, being attacked by those bandits... being blown away by Naga's spell... in that moment, I awakened!"

...Well... I didn't think people generally called that kind of awakening "spiritual"...

"How can I win Naga's heart!?"

"...How... well... I don't really understand such difficult things myself... but anyway, wouldn't it be more certain to try appealing to her in some way?"

"An appeal... hmm..."

Lester crossed his arms for a moment, thinking.

"Then, for example, how about I rescue Naga after she's been captured by bandits?"

...Haaaaaaaaaah...

I let out an involuntary sigh.

"...Now listen..."

"I know what you want to say. There's no way things would go that conveniently, right?"

...Oh... so he did understand...

I couldn't imagine there were bandits capable of capturing Naga, and even if such people existed, there was no way Lester would be a match for them.

"...Then, how...?"

"I've thought of that too, of course.

The next time we're attacked by bandits, I'll find an opening to knock Naga out, and the two of us will just run away! That way, we can let the bandits capture Naga!"

"....."

"Then, when it's time to rescue her, first Lina will flaunt her overwhelming destructive power and threaten them, saying, 'If you resist, this Lina's attack magic will explode!' to freeze them in place. Then, while the bandits are defenseless, I'll mow them down one after another and rescue Naga! This way, the plan is executable!"

...Are you a total villain...?

"...W-well, certainly, the plan is executable that way..."

"Right?"

"Gah! That's why! You can't just ignore the means for the sake of the plan! If you do something like that and then have the nerve to say, 'This is my feel-ings,' you couldn't complain even if she killed you!"

"...Ah... I see... you're right... With this plan, my sincerity won't come across, will it..."

...Where exactly in that plan was there any sincerity...?

"—I've got it! Then, conversely, I'll be captured by the bandits, and Naga will rescue me! And then... love... will bloom..."

"It won't bloom, it won't bloom."

"...Then how about approaching through action!? For example, what if I try wearing the same clothes as Naga..."

"Please stop, anything but that..."

I accidentally imagined it for a second and clutched my temples.

"...Hmm... then..."

Lester crossed his arms again, sinking into thought.

—In the end, that day concluded without a resolution, and after promising to discuss it again tomorrow, the two of them returned to their respective rooms.

...Well... if I thought about it, there was a theory that this wasn't the kind of problem that could be solved by discussion anyway...

"...*Yawn*..."

"Hmph. You're getting soft, Lina. You shouldn't be yawning all the time like that."

Naga, walking a step ahead, said that to me when I stifled yet another yawn today.

It was the second morning since Lester had come to me for advice. We were traveling along a highway through the forest.

The rustling of leaves swaying in the breeze. The soft morning sunlight. Everything invited sleep.

Fifty gold coins—I mean, moved by Lester's enthusiasm, I had stayed up late last night too, listening to his talk, which left me completely sleep-deprived.

Various ideas had come up, like trying to lure her with wealth, brainwashing her, or even creating a homunculus copy of Naga to fool him, but all of them lacked a decisive punch.

In the end, we agreed that we couldn't form a strategy without knowing the other person's tastes, so today, I was to casually probe into Naga's preferences.

"—By... by the way, Naga..."

Lester spoke up in a tone as if he were bringing up the weather.

Oh!? Was he going to start probing already!?

"I... I hope you don't mind me asking... but Naga, which do you prefer: a squashed cockroach or a slightly unreliable man!?"

Naga frowned for a moment at the question.

"...Well... I suppose if I had to choose, it would be a slightly unreliable man..."

"...Did you hear that, Lina!?"

Lester whispered joyfully,

"It seems there's quite a chance!"

"...Y-you think so...?"

"Then, Naga, one that’s been run over by a carriage—"

Before Lester could ask the next question, Naga and I stopped dead in our tracks.

"...Um...?"

"We have guests."

I murmured with a fearless smile.

"...Seems you've noticed us."

A man appeared from deep in the bushes. No matter how you looked at him, he was a fine-looking bandit, but for that, the fact that he was alone was...

"...Y-you!?"

Lester’s face paled when he saw the bandit’s face.

"Is he someone you know?"

"What are you saying!? He's one of the bandits who attacked us the other day!"

"...Oh, really...?"

Hearing that, I looked at the man's face again.

...Well, now that he mentioned it, I felt like I had seen him somewhere before...

But if I were to remember every single face of those bandit types—who seem unique but are actually utterly generic—no amount of brain matter would be enough.

In any case, he was still just a minor villain meant to be defeated.

Still... after we beat him senseless with attack magic, took all his money, tied him up, and threw him into a nearby river, for him to hold such a grudge and come back for revenge... his heart was either very small or he was very persistent...

"You took good care of me the other day. I let my guard down because you were women, and I paid the price."

"If you thought that, you shouldn't have come crawling back out again..."

"Shut up! ...This time, I've brought some help."

At that moment, I finally noticed it. A faint, unnatural sound mixed with the rustling of the leaves—the chanting of a spell!

"Scatter!"

I shouted and made a large leap almost at the same time—

"Burst Flare!"

KABOOM!

The spell released by the sorcerer hidden in the forest—the "help"—scattered flames and smoke around us.

Cough, cough!

Choking on the smoke and heat, the three of us coughed.

It was a spell with almost no killing power, but it was perfect for a distraction or a bluff.

But a bluff like this wouldn't work on Naga or me—

"Ugh!"

However, the sound that arose was Lester's voice.

"Darn it!"

By the time I realized it, it was too late.

"Heh-heh-heh... This one seemed the easiest to handle."

The bandit's voice drifted from behind the smoke that had yet to clear.

"If you value this guy's life, come to the castle ruins in the mountains to the north. I'll be waiting for you with plenty of traps."

...Darn it... realizing that even if they took a hostage right in front of us, they'd just be blown away along with him by a non-lethal spell, they changed their tactics. It seemed even the bandit species had some capacity for learning.

—But this wasn't the time to be impressed.

"You won't get away!"

Just as I was about to dash toward the presence receding into the smoke, bloodlust scorched the back of my neck.

—Behind me!?

"Flare Arrow!"

Almost simultaneously with someone's voice, I leapt to the side.

The *Flare Arrow* released by someone from behind scorched the space where I had been standing just moments ago and passed by.

The spell just now had come from a different location than where the person who cast the *Burst Flare* had been. If so, were there multiple sorcerers!?

Even when I searched for a presence, it seemed they had either fled after firing the spell or were hiding nearby.

And when the smoke cleared, the bandit and Lester had vanished.

Somewhere, a bird was chirping.

The sun, which had risen high in the sky, poured down mercilessly.

In the middle of all that, pushing through a mountain path that could hardly be called a road, Naga and I were heading straight toward the bandits' hideout.

The situation had become exactly as Lester had once described.

With this, Naga would rescue him, and love would bloom between them... I didn't feel like it would, though... definitely not...

...Anyway, for now, I decided we should try that angle...

While I was thinking about various things on the mountain path—

"!"

Naga and I stopped in our tracks for a moment.

It was a somewhat open space.

In the middle of it was a huge bamboo basket supported by a log tied with straw rope, and several gold coins scattered beneath it!

"Lucky!"

Naga and I spoke in unison and pounced on the scattered gold coins.

At the same time—

THUD!

The support log was pulled away, and the bamboo basket fell squarely over the two of us.

"Oh no! It's a trap!" I shouted in a loud voice.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Ignoring me, Naga continued to scramble for the gold coins.

Then, from outside the basket, I heard the presence of people approaching.

"...He... hey... what should we do? About this...?"

"...I... I don't know... I never thought they'd actually fall for this..."

The voices of the two men discussing it outside the basket were tinged with bewilderment.

"...F... for now... should we take them to the hideout...?"

"...I guess so..."

Eventually, weights were placed on top of the bamboo basket, and Naga and I were dragged along the mountain path, basket and all...

"They fell for *that* trap!?"

That voice, full of utter disbelief, belonged to the bandit who had snatched Lester.

"...Seriously... even a sparrow these days wouldn't fall for..."

Before he could finish his sentence—

"Damu Brass!"

CRACK!

The spell I released blew a hole in a part of the basket.

"What!?"

The bandit boss was flustered.

"Don't 'What!?' me... honestly, who on earth do you think you can keep trapped with a contraption like this nowadays?"

I said as I climbed out of the basket.

In front of the decaying castle, a line of bandits stood ready.

The boss was there, but there was no sign of anyone who looked like a sorcerer, and Lester was nowhere to be seen. He was probably inside the castle.

I pointed sharply at the boss.

"I bet you were planning to use this pathetic trap to lure us into letting our guard down, and then set a lethal trap later, but breaking through those one by one is just a hassle. I fell for this on purpose so you'd guide me here!"

"—So you got caught on purpose!?"

It was Naga who raised her voice.

"...Wait... did you perhaps fall for it by accident, not on purpose...?"

"It was a terrifying trap."

Naga answered my question with an utterly serious face.

...Naga the White Serpent... a terrifying person in many ways...

"Dammit! I have no choice!

Boys! Get them!"

The boss shouted, mostly out of desperation.

"Naga! I'll handle things here! You go inside the castle! Rescue Lester!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

With that, Naga began to run toward the castle while chanting a spell.

This should, at least, complete the scenario of "Naga rescuing Lester"...

"I won't let you!"

A group of bandits shouted and moved toward Naga—

"Flare Arrow!"

F-WHOOOSH!

A rain of my attack spells fell!

The bandits collapsed one after another. Naga successfully charged into the crumbling castle.

"Tch! Teachers! It's your turn!"

"Very well—"

In response to the bandit boss's voice, two figures dressed as sorcerers in cloaks and hoods appeared from the nearby bushes.

"Hmph. You're dead wrong if you think you can win just by having numbers."

I said with a composed expression.

If they were just going to fire spells at me from where I couldn't see them, it would be a bit of a nuisance, but once they showed themselves like this, knocking them down wasn't that difficult.

I murmured a spell while charging at the sorcerer figures.

The sorcerers were the ones who completed their spell first.

"Light!"

They released the magical light they had chanted toward me. First, a distraction, I see.

But how naive!

I twisted my body, easily dodging it, and went to kick one of the sorcerers—

SWISH!

A silver light swept through the air.

"!?"

I barely dodged the strike of a scimitar.

The one who swung that strike was the sorcerer figure in front of me.

And then, bloodlust emerged from behind!

—So that was it!

"Flare Arrow!"

At the same moment I heard the voice releasing the spell from behind, I made a large leap to the side!

"Gwaah!?"

The falling *Flare Arrows* struck down the two sorcerer figures.

When I turned around, there were men who looked just like generic bandit grunts.

However, two of them were not holding weapons.

These were the real sorcerers.

It wasn't like there was an absolute law of the universe that sorcerers must always wear cloaks and hoods. They had the two bandit grunts—who had been taught the simple *Light* spell that anyone could cast—dress up as sorcerers to draw my attention, while the sorcerers dressed as grunts attacked me from the opposite side—

For an enemy, it wasn't a bad plan.

But! Now that I had seen through it, I wasn't afraid!

I began to chant a spell—

"Mono Volt!"

The other sorcerer released his spell.

I dodged this one too by jumping easily. However, the moment I landed—

WHOOSH!

Along with the sound of cutting air, something tangled around my right leg!

A bola—a simple device with weights at the end of a rope, used for things like catching birds.

The one who threw it was the bandit boss!

There was no damage, but I completely lost my balance and fell to one knee.

One of the sorcerers completed his spell!

"Freeze Arrow!"

The person frozen on the spot by the rain of cold arrows was not me, but the sorcerer who had just finished chanting.

—That spell just now was—

When I looked, Naga was standing tall in front of the castle with a fearless smile on her face!

Lester, who had been successfully rescued, was also behind her.

...Well... it didn't look like love was blooming...

"How dare you! Burst Rondo!"

KABOOM!

Burning with rage, the spell released by the remaining sorcerer blew Naga and Lester away!

But!

"Flare Arrow!"

The spell I released knocked down that sorcerer.

In effect, the battle was decided at that moment.

It goes without saying that it didn't take long for me to beat down the rest of the bandits.

"...I wonder what will happen to those bandits and the hired sorcerers after this..."

Lester muttered that softly that night.

It was in the inn's eatery, which was once again deserted.

Just like always, I had been called out for a "consultation," and those were the first words Lester muttered.

"...Well, this time, we handed them all over to the authorities... so it probably depends on what they've done until now, but at best, they'll be eating prison food for a while, and at worst, it'll be the death penalty."

"...I see..."

Lester let out a small sigh.

"...A-actually, Lina! There's something I need to talk to you about..."

"I know. It's about Naga, right? It didn't quite go as planned—"

"No—that's not it."

But surprisingly, he cut off my words.

"I've already given up on her—on Naga... I've realized she's far too good for someone like me..."

...Well... while the questions of whether she was too good or not, or the fact that my dream of fifty gold coins had vanished remained, it was apparently a good thing that he had returned to his senses.

It had been a slim hope from the very beginning anyway...

"—Then, what's this consultation about?"

At my question, Lester fidgeted.

"...Actually, I... at that moment... when I was blown away by the sorcerer the bandits hired, I awakened!"

"Like I care!"

With a roar, the table I flipped hit Lester square in the head...

No happy ending, no happy ending.

(Inverse Love Classroom: End)

Battle On The Far Sea

The sea was vast and grand! The moon rose, and the sun rose too!

When people thought of summer, they thought of the ocean! And when they thought of the ocean—well, if you were a sensible person, you already knew where this was going!

As you might have guessed, the ship we were on had suddenly gone and wrecked itself.

And now—

About a dozen people, including Naga and me, were stranded on a nameless desert island far off the coast of the neighboring countries.

It all started two days ago.

Naga and I had arrived in a town with a view of the spreading blue sea. Perhaps because our pockets were feeling a bit heavy at the time, we decided to hop on a sightseeing boat just for the story of it.

Looking back, that was the first mistake.

Of course, this was a place where pleasure cruises operated. Normally, it wasn't the kind of area where a ship would meet with disaster.

But when luck was bad, bad things tended to pile up one after another.

Due to a sudden downpour and several other unforeseen circumstances and unlucky coincidences, the ship we were on ended up washing ashore on this desert island.

Fortunately, no passengers or crew members were harmed, but the ship was completely destroyed.

We could see land in the distance, but it wasn't a distance anyone could swim. Even if I used flight spells like *Levitation* or *Raywing*, or underwater breathing spells, at this distance, I would undoubtedly run out of strength before reaching the opposite shore.

"...The problem is what we're going to do from here on out..."

In front of the dozen or so dejected crew and passengers and the completely thoughtless Naga, I spoke up with a constructive opinion.

If I were to get discouraged and flustered by a little hardship like this, it would ruin the reputation of the warrior and genius sorceress Lina Inverse.

...Well... there was the argument that being a warrior or sorceress didn't matter much in a situation like this...

Anyway, the point was that thinking positively was what mattered most.

This island wasn't particularly large. I could manage drinking water with magic, but the problem was food.

It wasn't exactly a barren wasteland, but if the preserved food salvaged from the ship ran out, it would be quite difficult for this many people to live off the land for a long period.

In short, we had no choice but to escape this island as quickly as possible, by any means necessary.

However, when I asked for opinions, everyone just stayed silent, staring at me with dead eyes.

I let out a sigh.

"...It’s no good, everyone. You can't think about things pessimistically. Sure, the shipwreck was an unfortunate accident, but at least everyone is safe..."

"...Ho... an unfortunate accident, was it...?"

The captain muttered this while still sporting those dead eyes.

"...Y-yes. An unfortunate accident."

As I answered, I instinctively averted my gaze.

"An accident... huh..."

The captain continued in a sarcastic tone, still looking at Naga and me with those judging eyes.

...Well, maybe the fact that the *Dill Brand* I fired to drive off the giant octopus tangled in the rudder just happened to hit the rudder itself was a *tiny* bit bad.

And the fact that Naga, spurred on by the other passengers in the spirit of a party trick, summoned a Plasma Dragon whose *Dragon Breath* hit the mast directly was also probably a bit problematic.

It seemed the captain wanted to bring up those points, but...

"...W-well, there might have been a few clumsy moments, but it was the first time Naga or I had ever been on a ship like that. Ahahahaha!"

"It's not 'ahahahaha'!"

Everyone except Naga and me screamed in unison.

"—A-anyway."

I looked away from the group and pointed sharply at the land visible beyond the sea.

"Instead of blaming people for the past, we should be thinking about tomorrow!"

"...Look who's talking..."

I pretended not to hear the quip from someone behind me and continued.

"Regardless! A ship is indispensable for a safe return! But looking at the damage to that ship, it's impossible to repair it on this island. That means we have to call a rescue ship from over there."

"Call one... how?"

"By sending up a signal."

With that, I chanted a spell—

"Dragon Slave!"

BOOM!

I fired a *Dragon Slave* into the empty void near the island!

"Hmph. This should be visible even from the mainland over there. If I fire this off a few times a day at set intervals, someone will surely come to see what's going on."

"...Or they'll be too scared to come near..."

Twitch!

At someone's muttered comment, my face instinctively contorted for a second.

"...I-it'll be fine! You can't think about things pessimistically!"

"While you say that, what’s with the sweat running down your cheek...?"

"It's because of the heat!"

I declared firmly.

And then, exactly as I had planned!

It was two days later, just as the emergency rations from the ship were starting to run low, that we saw the silhouette of a ship heading our way in the distance.

"We're saved!"

Everyone gathered on the beach, letting out cries of joy.

"Hmph! Just as calculated."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! To be this happy over such a small thing, everyone is still such a child!"

As I puffed out my chest and acted important, Naga also started boasting for no reason, soaking in a sense of superiority.

With everyone watching, the ship drew closer and closer.

And then—

SPLASH!

ROAR!

Suddenly, a giant Plasma Dragon emerged, kicking up massive waves, and its *Lightning Dragon Breath* swept across the approaching ship!

CRACKLE-BOOM!

Crackling...

Everyone stood there in stunned silence, speechless, watching the Plasma Dragon let out a roar of victory while the ship went up in flames.

"...W-why is there a Plasma Dragon in a place like this...?"

After muttering that, I suddenly realized something.

"...N-Naga... just asking, but that Plasma Dragon you summoned for fun on the ocean... what... happened to it...?"

When I asked hesitantly, Naga tilted her head for a moment, then suddenly clapped her hands together and pointed toward the sea.

"Hmph. It looks like it’s doing quite well, just as you can see."

"It’s not 'looks like it'!"

The fists and kicks from the group struck Naga squarely.

And so.

The number of castaways had increased to about thirty, and a Plasma Dragon Countermeasure Headquarters was established!

I acted as the chairperson for the time being.

"First of all... we will have a detailed explanation regarding the ecology of the Plasma Dragon. Naga, if you please."

Met with the icy glares of everyone sitting on the sand, Naga appeared—despite having done nothing but sunbathe lately, she didn't have a hint of a tan.

She stood tall before the group, tossed her hair back with a flourish, and began.

"Hmph! If you want to know that badly, I shall tell you! About the Plasma Dragon!

Its entire body is long enough to coil around a small ship once. Its physique is close to that of a Sea Serpent, as you can see, and the *Lightning Breath* scattered from its mouth paralyzes the nervous systems of all living creatures! Its high-pressure plasma can easily set a wooden ship ablaze!

Its entire body is covered in hard scales, so ordinary swords are, of course, useless!

For an average warrior or sorcerer, even trying to oppose it is the height of recklessness!

Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! From the looks on your faces, it seems you finally understand the terror of the Plasma Dragon!"

"What are you doing scaring everyone!?"

WHAM!

Naga took my flying kick straight to the back of her head and faceplanted into the sand.

I took a deep breath and explained to everyone again.

"...Well, it’s true that the Plasma Dragon is powerful, like Naga just explained, but it’s definitely not an opponent that can't be defeated."

I said.

In fact, if a *Dragon Slave* of mine hit it directly, it would certainly die, and I heard that my older sister back home once took one down with a single kitchen knife.

...I don't know how she did it, though...

"For example, it’s possible to defeat it with a single strike from a powerful attack spell, but the problem is whether or not we can hit it.

After all, the opponent is in the ocean. Unless it shows itself right in front of us, there’s no way to attack it.

Even though it has 'Dragon' in its name, it’s closer to a Sea Serpent; it can't use speech or spells and is basically carnivorous. It’s not a pure dragon species, but it can use a proper *Dragon Breath*.

It lives mostly in the sea or large lakes, but it does come up onto land occasionally.

...Right now, probably because Naga left it summoned, she’s lost control of it, but it seems to be staying near Naga—meaning, in these waters."

"Wait a minute! Does that mean there’s a risk it might come up on land and attack us!?"

At the captain’s shout, I nodded honestly.

"It’s a definite possibility. But for us, that would be more convenient. If it just comes up on land, I can definitely blow it away with a single spell.

The problem is if it stays in the sea...

The reason it attacked the rescue ship is probably because it felt its territory was being invaded. If that’s the case, even if a second rescue ship comes, there’s a high risk it will be sunk just like the first one.

In that case, what we have to do is defeat it as quickly as possible—at least before the next rescue ship arrives!

To do that, we have to lure it out somehow!"

"In that case—I’ve got a great idea!"

One of the crew members said.

"...Hey, Lina... I feel like there’s something unsettling about this plan..."

Naga said with a dissatisfied face as I proceeded with the work.

"What are you talking about? Theoretically, it’s perfect!"

I checked the knot in the rope and gave a big nod.

"The Plasma Dragon is carnivorous. Furthermore, it has a tendency to hang around you, its summoner.

So, if we tie you to the ship's anchor and dangle you in the sea—wow! How mys-te-ri-ous! The Plasma Dragon will come closer in no time! I call it! The 'Man of the Sea’s Pole-and-Line Fishing' Strategy!"

"...When exactly did you become a 'man of the sea'?"

"The naming of the strategy is the hobby of the mastermind. Now, it’s about time to go."

I tied Naga to the anchor, and the other end of the rope extending from the anchor was tied to a log found on the island.

I chanted a spell under my breath—

"Beill Gane!"

In response to the words of power, the sand and rocks on the beach gathered and took shape—

RUMBLE!

The clay golem I created let out a roar toward the sky.

"Ooooooooooh!"

Clap, clap, clap, clap.

Amidst the applause and cheers from the onlookers, the golem began to move sluggishly, grabbed the log with both hands, swung it high over its head, and—

WHOOSH!

"Hyaaaaaaaah!?"

—Plop.

Naga’s long, echoing scream eventually vanished beneath the surface of the water.

"Oh, it flew to a pretty good spot."

The captain said leisurely, standing beside me.

The golem sat down on the beach for a while, still holding the "fishing rod."

The sound of waves. The cries of sea birds.

The rope didn't twitch at all.

"But... if we don't pull her up soon, won't she run out of breath?"

The captain muttered this after some time had passed.

I waved my hand with a smile.

"It’s fine. There’s a spell that lets you breathe underwater..."

At that point, my smile froze.

...Could Naga use that spell...? Come to think of it, she didn't seem to be chanting anything before we tossed her into the sea...

"Golem! Pull up the fishing rod!"

My command echoed across the beach.

"...Ugh... I thought I was going to die..."

Naga muttered as she was pulled back up, breathing heavily.

"Wow. That was a close one. Ahahahaha."

When I spoke to encourage her, she shot me a look of pure judgment.

"...Hmph... I’ve read you! Lina! You must be jealous of my talent and are burning with murderous intent!"

"That’s a misunderstanding."

Faced with such a baseless accusation, I took her hand.

"Holding murderous intent toward you...

There’s absolutely no way. Believe me.

It's just that I simply value your life about as much as an insect's."

"...I see..."

She nodded with a look of understanding, though her eyes remained dead.

"But Lina... if you can use a spell to breathe underwater, why don't you just dive in yourself and face it?"

"No."

I shook my head flatly at Naga's suggestion.

"...Why not?"

"There's the option of using *Raywing* to wrap a wind barrier around me—but buoyancy would kick in, and I wouldn't be able to dive very deep. Plus, I'd be busy controlling the *Raywing*, so I wouldn't be able to use any significant spells.

With an underwater breathing spell, I could definitely dive deep, but my mobility would be low, and if I actually encountered the Plasma Dragon, I wouldn't even be able to chant spells.

Besides... the saltwater would get my clothes wet..."

"Aren't you guys sorcerers? ...For instance, isn't there a technique to create a giant whirlpool and drag the dragon out?"

The captain said from the side, making an unreasonable demand.

"...It would be nice if there were... but unfortunately, there isn't anything like that."

I said.

Manipulating water, of course, belongs to the Shamanistic magic system, but attack spells using water haven't been researched much by the Sorcerers' Association.

The reason is simple. They're just difficult to handle.

With fire, ice, or lightning, calling forth a small fireball or a single bolt of lightning is enough to deal damage to an opponent. But if you want to deal damage with a water attack, just think about how much water you'd have to call forth.

It's possible to use spells in a place where there's already a large amount of water, but that requires dragging the opponent to such a location.

In other words, as a means of attack, other spells that can be used almost anywhere are far more popular than water attack magic, which is limited in where it can be used.

Most popular spells in the water category belong to the 'handy-if-you-know-them' variety, like calling forth drinking water or underwater breathing.

—That said, it didn't mean water attack magic was completely non-existent.

According to rumors, among the fishmen who live underwater, there are some who can manipulate terrifying spells, and even I know one spell that creates a large wave on the water's surface.

But in this vast ocean, I didn't think creating a small wave on the surface would do much to a Plasma Dragon lurking deep underwater.

However, the reality was that we had to do something.

If the next rescue ship were to be sunk as well...

The people on the mainland would probably start rumors like, "Both ships that went to that island have disappeared," or "A giant fireball rises around that island at the same time every day." Eventually, rumors would spread that "That is a cursed island. Do not approach it."

If that happened, there would be no more hope of a rescue ship coming.

—No, in the worst-case scenario, such talk might have already started, and there might be a risk that a second rescue ship wouldn't even be sent.

"I have to... I have to lure it out somehow..."

"Oh, Lina, if you're worrying over such a simple thing, you still have a long way to go."

The person who dismissively laughed at my mutter was Naga.

Of course, I said without any expectation,

"A long way to go... you talk so big, but it’s not like you have a brilliant idea anyway..."

But Naga puffed out her chest pointlessly far.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh! Lina Inverse! Don't underestimate me, Naga the White Serpent! With my plan, luring out the Plasma Dragon will be child's play!"

"What!?"

"Is that true!?"

The captain and everyone else crowded around her.

"Hmph. Of course.

We shall utilize that Plasma Dragon's territorial instinct! In other words! When the next rescue ship arrives, it will surely appear! And then..."

"...Hey, hey..."

I interrupted with a tired voice.

"That’s why... we're talking about doing something about it *before* that ship arrives. What are you doing suddenly using the ship as a decoy?"

"Hmph. If you don't like that idea, then an eye for an eye! How about we summon another Plasma Dragon and make it fight that one!?"

"That’s not bad... but do you... have the confidence to properly control the Plasma Dragon you summon...?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga laughed and didn't answer, but I didn't miss the single bead of sweat rolling down her cheek.

"...I’m telling you now... don't go making the situation even worse..."

I gave Naga a warning.

In her case, if I didn't caution her every single time, there was a risk she'd suddenly start doing something incomprehensible without permission.

"...Anyway, we have to do something about it..."

Before I could finish my mutter.

"A ship! A ship is heading this way!"

Someone's voice echoed through the area.

"It’s already here!?"

Standing up and looking out toward the horizon, I could indeed see one ship.

It was undoubtedly heading toward us.

"...This is bad... it’ll enter its territory soon..."

It was just a short distance from where the first rescue ship had been attacked by the Plasma Dragon.

I considered supporting the ship with spells for a moment, but at this distance, attack spells wouldn't reach.

Even if I tried to warn them, we didn't seem to be within range for my voice to carry...

"Darn it! If it’s come to this, we have to go there ourselves! Naga! You come too!"

With that, I chanted a spell.

"Raywing!"

As I released the words of power, my body floated into the air!

Enveloped in a wind barrier, it was a high-speed flight spell. Flying all the way to the mainland would be impossible, but flying as far as the ship was perfectly doable.

Naga chanted the same spell beside me, and the two of us sped through the air toward the ship!

And then—at that moment!

A dark shadow crossed the corner of my vision!

I hurriedly looked over, and beneath the waves shimmering in the daylight, there was one giant dark shadow!

It was him!

He was undoubtedly heading toward the approaching ship.

I won't let you!

I mustered all my strength, increased my speed, and dashed straight toward the ship as if kicking up the waves!

I was faster, somehow!

Finally reaching the ship, Naga and I canceled our spells and landed on the deck.

A man who seemed to be the captain looked at us with a suspicious face.

"...W-who on earth are you...?"

"Detailed explanations come later! More importantly, there’s a Plasma Dragon in the nearby sea! Be careful!"

"A dragon!?"

The captain’s face turned pale as he shouted.

...Well... in this case, I felt like being careful wouldn't really change anything, but it was also true that there wasn't much else to say.

Standing by the railing, I could clearly see the dark shadow approaching beneath the surface.

But the problem was what came next. Even if I fired off attack magic in this state, the water would act as a cushion, and there was a high possibility I wouldn't be able to finish it off.

That said, if I waited for it to emerge, I could certainly deal reliable damage, but if I used a spell that was too large, there was a high risk the ship would be caught in the crossfire.

And besides, even if we defeated the Plasma Dragon, if this ship sank, that would be the end of it. A ship of this size would be finished if it took one hit from the dragon’s breath.

If so, the priority was to keep it away from this ship!

"Naga! I recall you can use *Sea Blast*, right!? Fire it off when I give the signal!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

Naga began to chant a spell in response.

I also began to chant a spell.

The dark shadow drew closer beneath the sea.

And then—Naga finished her chant, followed by me finishing mine—

"Dragon Slave!"

I released the spell at the approaching dark shadow!

BOOM!

A spreading flash. A thundering explosion.

The *Dragon Slave* I fired exploded near where the dark shadow had been.

The impact of the explosion created a large wave, and the wave headed toward the ship.

Of course, if I left it like this, the ship would undoubtedly capsize—

"Naga! Now!"

But there was no reaction to my words!?

Looking back, Naga was staring at me with a troubled expression.

...Aaaaah! That’s right! To use *Sea Blast*, you have to be touching the water's surface!

In that case, there was only one move to take!

I circled around behind Naga and kicked her straight into the sea!

"Sea Blast..."

Undeterred by the adversity, Naga properly chanted the spell.

Yes! You're actually useful once in a while!

It was the wave-creating spell I mentioned earlier. The giant wave Naga produced collided head-on with the wave produced by the shockwave of my *Dragon Slave*, and they surged, swirled, and ebbed while canceling each other out.

The ship was buffeted by significant waves, but it wasn't enough to overturn it.

When I looked, the dark shadow was no longer beneath the surface.

"...Did we get it?"

Turning toward the voice from my side, I saw Naga standing there calmly—when on earth did she climb back up?

"...Y-you’re alive!?"

"...Were you planning to kill me...?"

"...No... well..."

I mumbled noncommittally and turned my gaze back to the sea.

"Anyway... he’s still alive. If we had finished him, there would be at least some blood left. He probably just got surprised by my *Dragon Slave* and fled to the bottom of the sea."

"...In that case..."

"While he’s hunkered down at the bottom of the sea! Captain! Head toward that island! There are castaways!"

The evacuation was carried out at a rapid pace.

The ship got as close as possible to the island, and from there, boats made round trips between the island and the ship. During that time, Naga and I stayed on the ship, keeping watch for the Plasma Dragon.

A few times after that, the dragon showed its dark shadow beneath the surface, but each time, Naga or I would scare it away with a minor trick.

However—I noticed it. The dragon was gradually becoming bolder.

It was getting used to our threats.

Eventually, everyone boarded the ship, the anchor was raised, and the ship set off.

But—the Plasma Dragon hadn't gone away.

"...It’s stopped showing up..."

—How much time had passed?

Naga muttered this softly while gazing at the swaying surface.

With the help of others, we were all monitoring the surroundings, but since the ship started leaving the island, the Plasma Dragon hadn't appeared.

"Didn't it give up? Knowing that the ship is leaving its territory."

"No—"

I shook my head slightly.

There was no basis for it, but my intuition told me so.

"It’ll probably come—one more time!"

At that moment.

"What’s that!?"

Someone's voice echoed through the area.

"What is it!?"

"There’s something! Below us!"

"What!?"

Naga and I shouted at the same time and peered into the sea directly below the railing.

There, I could clearly see a giant dark shadow slowly ascending.

"It’s him! —He’s right below us!?"

I shouted.

At this position, if I used an attack spell, the ship would also take damage!

That guy! He’s smarter than I thought!

Fine! If that’s how it’s going to be!

"Naga! It doesn't matter now, so summon another Plasma Dragon!"

"...Eh? But..."

"I don't care if you can't control it! We’ll pit that one against him, and then run away in the meantime!"

"Hmph! If that’s the case, I understand!"

Naga chanted a spell in response. The shadow below was rapidly increasing in size.

And then, Naga’s spell was complete!

"Plasma Dragon!"

ROAR!

The nearby water surface swirled violently, and from its center, a Plasma Dragon with a vivid emerald green color appeared!

"Screeeeeeeee!"

Did the one under the ship notice the dragon’s roar? It changed course and began to move toward the dragon Naga had just summoned.

"Now! Captain! Leave this area at full speed!"

"Roger!"

Before long, the two dragons confronted each other behind the ship, raising their necks.

Hiss! Roar!

They growled at each other for a while, and then—

ROOAAARRR!

The two of them let out a high-pitched roar together, made a pose as if nodding, lined up their necks, and charged straight toward us!

"What does this mean!?"

I couldn't help but shout.

But Naga remained calm, keeping both hands on her hips.

"...Hmph... it seems a friendship has bloomed..."

"Don't let it bloom! Not that kind of thing!

Naga! Can you unsummon the one you just called!?"

"Hmph! If I could do that, I wouldn't have any trouble!"

"Don't act so proud! ...Aaaaaah! I knew the situation would get worse!

Fine! If it’s come to this, we’ll just have to drive them off again!"

I chanted a spell as I spoke.

By this time, the two Plasma Dragons had submerged their entire bodies and were chasing the ship from behind.

"Fireball!"

the *Fireball* I fired exploded on the surface.

But! The two Plasma Dragons didn't even seem to flinch and continued to charge straight toward us!

Fine! If that’s how you want to play it!

"Captain! Give me one boat! Naga! You’re coming with me!"

I boarded the boat with Naga and had them lower it to the water surface.

The ship continued on, leaving the boat behind.

And then, two shadows approached side by side beneath the surface!

"Naga! Fire off some spells and lure them over here!"

"Understood!"

The two of us chanted spells simultaneously, and soon, *Dill Brand*, *Ice Arrow*, and *Blue Wave* were striking the water surface.

Of course, it didn't affect the dragons in the sea at all, but we seemed to have succeeded in drawing their attention.

They completely ignored the departing ship and took a stance toward us.

They probably sensed it instinctively—that on this tiny boat were the ones who had the power to defeat them.

The two shadows drifted around for a while, circling the boat from a distance, but then they split to the left and right and charged at the boat in a pincer formation!

Then, right in front of the boat, they raised their necks high above the water and surged forward to crush the boat!

—I wonder if they noticed.

That Naga and I weren't on the boat.

At that moment, we were above the boat—high above the Plasma Dragons' heads—using Naga's *Raywing*.

And I had already finished chanting my spell.

The moment the two dragons made contact with that tiny point, the boat!

"Dragon Slave!"

My spell exploded!

BOOM!

Even through the wind barrier surrounding us, the thundering sound and vibrations were felt.

Yes—

In that moment, the battle on the vast ocean was finally settled.

"Whooooooooh!"

The crew and passengers greeted the two of us with cheers as we returned to the ship using *Raywing*.

The single strike of the *Dragon Slave* that finished the two of them caused the stern to be splashed by a few waves, but otherwise, there was no damage.

Perhaps out of joy at being saved, a party-like revelry soon began on the ship.

There were, of course, alcohol and songs. People suddenly started dancing, and there were all sorts of nonsensical party tricks, including magic and short stories.

And eventually, when the party was in full swing, one person stood up.

"Hmph! Number thirteen, Naga the White Serpent! I shall perform my hidden talent, 'Plasma Dragon Summoning'!"

"Don't you dare!"

The punches and kicks from everyone perfectly and completely silenced Naga.

Happy ending, happy ending.

(Battle On The Far Sea: End)

Go For it, Necromancer!

"...This village, too," I muttered gloomily, surveying the scenery.

"Hmph... I wonder what on earth this culprit is thinking," Naga added, her voice sounding uncharacteristically tired.

We were looking at a small, unremarkable village along the highway. All around it stretched a peaceful, if monotonous, pastoral landscape.

The problem wasn't the scenery itself, but what was loitering within it: **countless zombies and skeletons.** They seemed to be just hanging around without causing immediate physical harm, but it certainly wasn't a pleasant sight. Most people have a natural physiological aversion to this sort of thing, and it's hardly ideal for a child's upbringing.

This wasn't the first time this had happened. This was the fifth or sixth town where the deceased had suddenly risen as zombies, skeletons, or mummies just to loiter about. While the culprit's identity and motive remained a mystery, we couldn't just leave it be. Thus, Naga and I were currently pursuing the perpetrator under orders from the **Mage's Association**.

"Anyway, Naga, let's do something about these zombies first!"

"Hmph. Leave it to me," Naga declared haughtily before beginning her incantation.

"Purification Barrier!"

Instantly, a wave of soft light radiated outward from Naga. As the light washed over them, the zombies, mummies, and skeletons turned to dust in a heartbeat. This high-level **White Magic** is completely harmless to humans and animals, but it easily purifies low-level undead. The spell covered a massive area, returning almost every undead in the village back to the earth.

The only downside is that it's a major spell that can usually only be used once a day. I was surprised when I first learned Naga could use such magic, but then again, she’s full of hidden tricks. Soon, the undead had crumbled away, and the peaceful, ordinary countryside returned to the village.

"Ugh. I'm exhausted," Naga said weakly, cracking her shoulders.

"Yeah, good job. But with this, we've pretty much traced the enemy's path," I murmured, looking off toward the horizon.

"It's you, isn't it?! The one behind all these undead incidents!"

"Waaaaah! I'm sorry! I didn't mean any harm!"

Beyond my pointing finger, the girl immediately began apologizing. *Bingo*.

Based on the pattern of the outbreaks, I had guessed the next incident would happen in this town. We used high-speed flight magic to get ahead and then simply pointed a finger at everyone coming down the highway, accusing them of being the culprit. It's a rough method, but the success rate is surprisingly high. Even so, it's rare for someone to confess so honestly.

"So... you really are the one...?" I asked again.

The woman profusely apologizing with tears in her eyes looked to be about seventeen or eighteen. She was a silver-haired woman dressed like a mage.

"I'm so sorry! There are reasons for all of this!"

"Well, for now, why don't we go eat something nearby and you can tell us these 'reasons' of yours..."

"Uuugh... my name is **Winnie**," she began slowly after devouring five full meals and finally calming down.

"I'm a mage, as you can see. My family has been a long line of distinguished **Necromancers**, both my father and mother. Because of that, I was expected to have talent and was taught the secret arts of necromancy from a young age."

Yikes... what a rotten family tree, I thought.

"Hmph. So you got sick of having it forced on you and ran away?" Naga guessed.

Winnie shook her head. "No... it's not like that. I studied the basics of magic and worked hard on my necromancy. I mastered the theories and techniques, and then it was time for the practical application."

"And let me guess—it didn't go well?" I interjected.

She shook her head again. "No, the application was a huge success. My parents even praised me, saying they'd never seen such 'lively' zombies before."

Lively zombies...?

"So, there wasn't a problem up to that point?"

"Actually, there was. One major problem." Winnie let out a heavy sigh. "I realized for the first time then... that I'm **physiologically incapable of handling zombies and skeletons.**"

Wait, what? You should have realized that a bit sooner...

"So, to build up a tolerance to the undead, I decided to go on a solo training journey."

"I have to ask," Naga said, lacking any sense of poetic sentiment, "training is one thing, but why do you have to travel?"

"Well, everyone knows that 'training' legally requires either mountain seclusion or a solo journey. I wanted to get used to zombies and skeletons, so I've been going from town to town, using my spells to make them. But whenever they actually start wandering around in front of me, I get so scared... and I always end up running away."

She sipped her herb tea with a timid look. So that's why the undead were loitering everywhere. Still, it was a huge nuisance for everyone else.

"If you hate undead that much, you should just quit being a necromancer."

"It's not that I hate them!" Winnie shook her head vigorously. "I mean, isn't it every girl's dream to be surrounded by zombies and ghouls?"

"...Is it...?"

"My mother told me she'd felt that way since she was little. It's not that I hate them, it's just that I'm... a bit bad with them. I've always been bad with ghost stories. But I want to overcome this and become friends with the undead!"

"Hmph, in short, you just want to stop being a scaredy-cat, right?" Naga said dismissively.

"Can you do it!?" Winnie leaned in. "If you can fix this, I'll pay you whatever you want!"

"Payment!?" I shouted, leaning in as well.

This meant if we succeeded, we'd get a reward from Winnie, solve the undead mystery for the Mage's Association, and get *their* reward too! Oh man! Is this that "double reward" dream every girl has?! Of course, that only worked if we actually "cured" Winnie.

"Naga, do you actually have a plan for this?"

"Ho ho ho ho! Don't you worry, Lina!" Naga puffed out her chest pointlessly. *That confidence is exactly what scares me*.

"Listen, people can get used to anything. Even fear! Basically, if she experiences something much scarier than zombies or skeletons, the undead won't bother her anymore!"

"Oh! That actually makes sense! So, how are you going to do it?"

Naga gave a fearless smirk and held up one finger. "**A test of courage.**"

A crescent moon, sharp as a reaper's scythe, cast a faint light over the night. We were on a narrow path deep in the mountains, away from the main highway. We had been hiding in the bushes for who knows how long when I suddenly snapped back to reality.

"...Naga... what on earth are we doing...?"

"Hmph. What a thing to say... you aren't sleepwalking, are you?" Naga, currently dressed in a **giant mushroom costume**, turned toward me and scoffed. "This is the best way to build Winnie's resistance to 'terror.' I thought about a ghost story circle, but this time we need to overcome 'visual horror.'"

"...No, what I want to know is why we have to be dressed like this," I said, taking a few heavy, stomping steps.

For the record, I was dressed as a **giant yellow star**. It was incredibly hard to walk in. Climbing the mountain path in this was an absolute nightmare.

"Hmph. How shallow, Lina. If we hired people, it would cost money."

"So... I'm asking why it's a mushroom and a star..."

"It couldn't be helped. These were the only things left at the costume rental shop that looked usable."

"I don't think this is scary at all, though..." I probably should have realized that before putting it on, but at the time, my head was so full of the double reward that I didn't think that far ahead.

"Hmph. I wouldn't be so sure," the giant mushroom said, peering down the dark path. "After all, the people who passed us earlier were terrified."

"...I think they were terrified in a very different way..."

"They were scared, so it counts. Who cares?"

"I guess... but she's late. Winnie..."

"True, she should have been here by now. Don't tell me she got too scared and ran away—"

"Kyaaaah!"

A faint scream came from the darkness. There was no mistaking it—that was Winnie!

"That was—!?"

"Winnie's voice! Let's go, Naga!"

Shouting, I began stomping down the night path as fast as a giant star could go.

"Heh heh heh. It's dangerous for a little lady to be walking alone in the mountains at night, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yeah. We could escort you if you want."

"Please stop! I beg of you!"

About ten men were surrounding Winnie, grabbing her hands. Obviously, no decent person wanders mountain paths at night without a good reason. Judging by their appearance, they were clearly bandits.

"Heh heh heh. Don't be like that—"

"That's enough!"

At my voice, the group turned around—and froze. For a moment, only the sound of insects filled the air.

"...It... it looks like a mushroom and a star..."

"...Yeah... that's what I'm seeing, too..."

One of them whispered, and the others nodded slightly. Look, it's not like Naga and I *wanted* to still be wearing these. These costumes had ties on the back, meaning you couldn't get in or out of them without help. Plus, a mushroom has no hands, and the points of a star aren't exactly suited for delicate work. We couldn't even untie each other. The shopkeeper had helped us into them. We never expected to run into bandits at a time like this.

"Release her!" I pointed one of my star points at the men.

It probably didn't look very cool, but it seemed to have a certain intensity. The bandits and Winnie all recoiled a step. After staring at each other for a while, the bandits eventually nodded to each other and let out a heavy sigh.

"...Let's just pretend we didn't see this..."

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't ignore us!"

I shouted, but the bandits kept their eyes averted, starting a conversation about the weather and their neighbors.

"Fine! If that's how you're going to play it, I'll make you notice us! Let's go, Naga!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

Naga began to chant—and then started fidgeting. *Oh right... she can't make the hand signs because of the costume*.

Naga didn't give up, struggling pointlessly inside her suit. I couldn't make hand signs either, but I just had to use a spell that didn't require them. I began to chant the **Flare Arrow** spell under my breath when—

Thump!

"Waaaaah!?"

Something suddenly pushed my back, and I tumbled forward. *Baf*. I fell flat on my face. It seemed Naga had lost her balance and knocked me over. Something heavy was now resting on my back.

"Hey! Naga! What are you doing!?"

"Hmph. Obviously, I lost my balance and fell."

"Don't sound so proud! Get off me!"

"Ho ho ho ho! If I could stand up on my own, I would have done it already!"

"Then roll off!"

While we were struggling on the ground, I sensed movement. I craned my neck to see the bandits heading into the brush, dragging Winnie with them. The last man turned back, his lip curling into a smirk.

"...Heh."

Snap.

Blood rushed to my head. "Hey! You! You just laughed at us, didn't you!?"

I shouted from the ground, but the man ignored me and vanished into the thicket. *Ooh... you...!* Kidnapping Winnie is one thing, but a mere bandit laughing at me, Lina Inverse!?

"Gaaaah! That burns me up! Naga! I don't care about anything else now, I'm going to beat those bandits to a pulp!"

"Hmph! Fine! Let's roll back to the village, find someone to help us out of these suits, and—"

"That'll take forever! We're chasing them now! Like this!"

"Ho ho ho ho! Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse! How can we pursue them when we can't even stand up?"

"Like this!" I began chanting.

"I see." Naga started the same incantation.

Soon, our **High-Speed Flight** spells were ready.

"Raywing!"

Wrapped in a barrier of wind, I floated into the air. With this spell, it didn't matter if I had hands or not. And so, the star and the giant mushroom soared into the night sky after Winnie and the bandits.

"Special Move! Meteor Fall!"

Dagoosh!

Shouting a nonsensical move name, I slammed my wind barrier into one of the bandits.

"Wha—!? What the—!?"

Naga and I stood before the startled bandits. "I'll say it once more. Let Winnie go and disappear! If you do, I won't make you regret it!"

"What was that!?" One of the bandits, presumably the boss, barked. "You think you can act tough just because you're a star and a mushroom?! I'm not holding back! Get 'em, boys!"

"Yeah!" They all drew their weapons at once. But we had already finished our chants!

"Ice Arrow!"

Naga and I released our spells simultaneously. If an arrow accidentally hit Winnie, we could just laugh it off later.

"Zuhewaaaaaaaa!?"

The bandits' screams echoed as they were pelted by countless arrows of cold. They collapsed in a heap. *Hmph. Easy.* Well, they were just bandits after all. Or so I thought, until—

"Ugh..."

"Uooooooooooooooh!"

One by one, they started standing up! All of them!

"Wha—!?" Naga and I both cried out.

"Not... yet...!" They staggered toward us like heroes from some old epic.

We scrambled to chant our next spells. Just before a man reached us—

"Dug Break!"

"Bomb Di Wind!"

After being blown back by my spell, Naga's spell hit them as a follow-up. "Hmph. They had some guts for bandits, but—"

I stopped.

"...Damn... it..."

They were still trying to get up! These nameless fodder characters were actually trying to keep fighting!

"Ho ho ho ho! How foolish! You should have just stayed down, but you just had to keep coming!" Naga said, sounding like a total villain.

"Shut... up!" one of them barked. "We're professional bandits! Our reputation is dead if we lose to a star and a mushroom!"

...I guess I can understand that feeling...

"Here I come!" He charged at Naga with incredible speed, sword raised. *Shit!* At that range, she couldn't dodge in that mushroom suit!

"Uooooooooooooh!"

Zon!

With a dull thud, the man's longsword pierced straight through the giant mushroom!

"Naga!?"

"Ho ho ho ho ho! Still too green!"

Naga's familiar high-pitched laugh rang out. The bandit recoiled in terror, leaving his sword stuck in the mushroom's belly.

"Impossible! I definitely felt it hit! Are you immortal!?"

Of course not. He had just pierced the padding of the costume. But since they couldn't tell the difference between human flesh and stuffing, it was clear they had never fought someone in a mascot costume before. Then again, who has? While he was distracted, I quickly finished my chant.

"Flare Arrow!"

Kyugodogodogodo!

This time, their spirits were finally broken, and the bandits stopped moving. I walked over to the man who had smirking at us earlier and looked down at him.

"...Hmph." I gave a small scoff.

Hikku! The man's face twisted in frustration. *Alright! Payback for the smirk!*

"Hmph. Looks like that's settled."

"I guess." I agreed with Naga, but then I realized something. "...Wait, Naga, where's Winnie?"

"Hmph. That's uhhh..."

"You don't know, do you?"

"...Well... yes..." Naga looked a bit embarrassed. She scanned the fallen bandits. "Come to think of it... there aren't enough of them here..."

"Really?"

"Hmph. I'm certain."

Man, she's surprisingly good at keeping track of fodder like this.

"Which means Winnie was taken by the missing ones!" They were probably planning to use her as a hostage.

"Hmph. Seems so. Let's go, Lina!"

"Go where? Which way?"

"Er..." Naga blinked. Total darkness stretched out around us.

"Hmph... you have a point..."

Just then—

"Udowaahhhhhh!" A man's scream echoed from the distance.

"That way!" I pointed with a star point. We cast Raywing again and took to the sky.

We flew toward the sound, and soon I noticed the forest below was rustling. *What the—!?*

In the middle of the commotion, I saw a few people. Found them! We descended nearby.

"This is...!" Naga gasped.

Swarming through the trees were **countless zombies and skeletons!** There must have been over a hundred of them.

"Lina! Naga! Help meeee!" Winnie screamed, held by two men in the middle of the undead horde. The men were absolutely panicking at the approaching wall of corpses.

"Hmph! Lina! While they're distracted—"

"Wait, Naga!" I stopped her. "Let her do it! Winnie! You called these undead here, didn't you!?" I shouted.

"Yes! There was a graveyard nearby... but this isn't the time for that! Help me!"

"No! You're going to defeat those bandits! By controlling the undead!"

Winnie went silent for a moment. "I can't! It's impossible!"

"Do it, Winnie! Don't you want to be friends with the undead!?"

There was another silence. "...Understood! I'll try!" Her voice was filled with determination.

"Everyone! Listen to me!"

At Winnie's shout, the zombies and skeletons all turned toward her at once.

"Hiiii...!" She shivered, but continued in a raspy voice. "...So... please do your best!"

『...Do what...?』 the undead collective replied in unison.

When you're getting sass from zombies and skeletons, you're pretty much done as a human. Or maybe I should praise Winnie for her skill in mass-producing undead that can talk back to their master.

"Um, I mean..." Winnie stammered. "...Beat up the people here!"

Wait, what kind of order is that!? Undead generally only take simple, specific commands. If you tell them to beat up the people "here," that includes Naga and me! But it was too late. The undead began to swarm!

We braced ourselves as the undead shuffled past us—wait, past us?

"Why aren't they attacking us?" Naga muttered.

"Maybe... it's because of these costumes? They don't think we're human..."

I mean, it's lucky, I guess... but being treated as a non-human by an undead is kind of insulting.

"Hmph, seems so. Look over there..."

I looked where Naga was pointing. There were the two bandits—and Winnie herself—getting absolutely pummeled by the undead.

And so, the incident ended. I’m not sure I’d call it "resolved," but it definitely ended. The mass outbreaks of undead stopped completely, and Naga and I successfully collected our reward from the Mage’s Association.

As for Winnie...

After being beat up by her own undead that night, she developed a deep-seated hatred for them. I hear she is now a devoted priestess, spending every day researching purification spells.

I suppose they lived happily ever after. Probably.

(Go For It, Necromancer!: End)

The Battle For Autumn Flavors

Scattered leaves dance in the soft sunlight. Autumn colors dye the mountains in a myriad of hues.

— **Autumn** —

Yes! Autumn means the season of food! Salmon is delicious, saury is savory, and the vegetables and fruits are in full harvest! If you don't eat now, when will you?!

And truly, the reigning monarch of autumn flavors is the **Nigitake**!

It’s a type of mushroom with perfect flavor, aroma, and texture. Grill it, and a mellow fragrance wafts through the air! Put it in a clear soup, and you can enjoy both the taste and the scent. Even eaten sashimi-style, that crunch and aroma are irresistible!

Kukuu! So good it's almost frustrating!

However, these Nigitake rarely cross our lips. They are scarce, usually snatched up by nobles and the wealthy. On the rare occasion they appear in a normal shop, the price is astronomical.

But now! Those very Nigitake!

This time, just by catching a petty thief, I can get them along with the commission fee!

"Of course I’ll take the job!" I shouted, leaning halfway across the table.

"I... I see..." the village headman said, backing away, overwhelmed by my intensity.

We were in a tiny, backwater village in the Kingdom of Raltigue. Surrounded by mountains, it was practically a hidden hamlet, but this village was actually one of the nation's leading producers of Nigitake—known only to those in the loop.

However... last year, someone sneaked into the village mountains and made off with almost all the Nigitake. The culprit has returned this year. Villagers have spotted a

suspicious figure, and some Nigitake have already been stolen. If they get cleaned out again, the village will take a massive hit.

That's why the headman requested help from me—since I had wandered into the village specifically looking to eat Nigitake.

Nigitake, Nigitake, I'm so happy~♪ Eat them raw, eat them grilled, put them in a lightly salted soup...

With my brain completely filled with thoughts of mushrooms, I made my way up the autumn mountain path. I didn't know who the thieves were, but anyone skumping around someone else's mountain to swipe mushrooms had to be a coward. One spell to the face should wrap things up.

However, in a way, the villagers were scarier than the thieves. They had the advantage in numbers and local knowledge. Depending on who caught the thief first, the amount of Nigitake in my stomach would change drastically.

But first, the problem was finding them...

"Lucky..." I whispered.

The wind blew. Leaves fluttered.

"Did you really think you were hidden?" I muttered toward the four figures lurking in the trees.

"Ho... it seems you have some skill..."

"Zazazaaa!"

With a rustle of leaves, four shadows dropped to the ground! Judging by their outfits, they weren't just common bandits. They looked like... well, like "Evil High Executives" straight out of a heroic ballad.

The leader was a young man in crimson armor; next to him, a scrawny, small man; then a massive, hulking brute; and finally, the lone woman of the group—flaming red hair, incredibly skimpy partial armor, and carrying a whip. She was the quintessential "Evil Female Executive."

"Amateurs like you wandering the mountains won't be any help!" she scoffed. "We, the **Village Youth Association**, will catch the Nigitake thieves!"

".....Huh.....?" I stared at them, blank-faced. "Did you just say... 'Village Youth Association'?"

"Hmph. I did. What of it!?" she said, flicking her hair.

"Then why on earth are you dressed in such suspicious outfits!?"

"Suspicious? How rude," the man in red armor countered. "Don't you know? This is the latest fashion in the city!"

"No it's not! No it's not!" I waved my hands dismissively.

"Hmph! You look down on us because we're hicks! But we won't be fooled! Uncle Jack, who went to the city for supplies recently, said this is what's trending!"

Your uncle is a massive liar... I sighed. "Listen... 'hick' doesn't mean someone who lives in the country. It refers to someone who tries to act city-slick and misses the mark completely. Like you guys."

"What did you say!?" The red armor reached for his sword, but the woman stopped him.

"If you have time to complain about our clothes, why don't you go find the thieves? Or were you planning to take the fee and play around while we do the work?"

Grrr. "Fine. No point wasting time on people with no fashion sense."

We glared at each other until sparks practically flew, then turned our backs and walked in opposite directions.

Dammit. I am definitely not losing to them!

"Ugh... no harvest today, huh..."

That night, at the village's only combined eatery and inn, I sighed into my cup of hot milk. I had spent all day wandering and searching from the sky, but found no one.

"Oh! Miss Lina!" The village headman rushed to my table, looking frantic. "They did it! The thieves made off with a huge haul of Nigitake!"

"Whaaaat!?" I bolted upright. "Today!?"

"The patrol found the patches stripped. Based on the state of them, it was definitely done during the day!"

Tch! They got me! "Headman, did anyone see anything suspicious?"

He shook his head. "The mountain is wide... you must have just missed each other. Oh, did you meet our Youth Association boys?"

"Yeah, in the mountains..."

"Good, good. Nice bunch, aren't they?"

"...Well... their fashion sense was a bit hard to keep up with..."

The headman looked offended. "To you city folk, our country clothes might not look refined, but that gear is the best for mountain trekking!"

"The full plate armor...?"

"Full plate armor...?" The headman blinked.

"You know! The four-man group: red armor, a big guy, a small guy, and the woman with the whip! The Youth Association, right!?"

The headman fell into a stunned silence. "...Those... were probably the Nigitake thieves..."

".....Eh.....?"

A cold breeze seemed to whistle through the room.

"Didn't you think they were suspicious!?" the headman barked.

"Aaaaaah! But they told me they were the Youth Association!"

"Hohohoho..." The headman looked at me with dead eyes. "So you're telling me you believed, without a shadow of doubt, that a group consisting of a guy in red armor, a giant, a midget, and a woman with a whip was the local Youth Association."

I've seen so many weirdos in my life that I just assumed that was normal for this village! But I couldn't lose the headman's trust now. I slammed my fist on the table.

"Unforgivable! Those thieves! Not only stealing Nigitake, but making a fool out of ME!"

"If you fail this time, there's no commission fee..." the headman stated coldly.

The next day, I found them. They were crouching in the brush, busy harvesting.

"Found youuuuuu!" I charged out.

"Wha—!?" They scrambled up, Nigitake spilling from their hands.

"I've got you now, you thieves! How dare you lie to me yesterday!"

"Hmph! You didn't look like a local, so we put on an act! Our performance wasn't half bad, was it?" the red armor gloated.

"It was a terrible lie that would be caught immediately!"

"And yet a certain moron fell for it..." the woman whispered.

Snap! "I'll show you moron! **KIIIIIIIICK!**"

Goga!

The stone I threw hit the woman square in the head, knocking her flat.

"Hmph! How's that!?"

"Wait, wait!" the red armor yelled. "You just said 'Kick'!"

"I did!" I answered proudly.

"That wasn't a kick!"

"It was a feint!"

"I see!" *He actually accepted that*. "But we won't be caught so easily! Scatter!"

I chased the big guy, who was carrying the unconscious woman. I used **Elmekia Lance** (a spell that damages the spirit/mind) to try and stop him, but the coward used the woman as a shield! Just like... well, just like something I might do.

Eventually, I cornered the leader, the red armor, at a dilapidated hunter's shack deep in the woods.

"My comrades may have fallen, but I will continue the Nigitake thefts alone! I will control the Nigitake distribution route, connect with nobles, and rule the underworld!"

"I don't think you can do that with just four people stealing mushrooms..."

"**Dug Wave!**"

Bagon! My spell sent him flying. He crawled back up, acting tough despite his body shaking.

"Heh... is... is that all you've got...?"

"You're shaking all over, you know."

"It's... it's an act to make you lower your guard! I don't even need to fight you... **GOLEM!**"

The shack exploded as a giant **Wood Golem** burst through the walls!

"Hmph. **Fireball.**"

Booooon! The Wood Golem turned into a massive bonfire instantly.

"Noooooooo! My—! Nooooooooooo!" the red armor screamed, jumping up.

"Building a golem out of wood is just asking for it to be burned," I said dryly.

The red armor glared at me. "You idiot! Where do you think we were hiding the stolen Nigitake!?"

...*Wait. Don't tell me*...

I slowly turned my head toward the blazing Wood Golem. If that golem wasn't for combat, but for *storage and transport*...

The smell of roasted Nigitake began to fill the autumn air.

"So... what happened to the stolen Nigitake in the end?" the headman asked quietly. His eyes weren't smiling.

"Ah... ahaha... well, they got a *little* bit toasted, but Nigitake is Nigitake, right?"

I placed a large cloth sack on the table. The headman peered inside.

"...What is this charcoal?"

"...Ni... Nigitake..."

Silence. Then we both burst into hollow laughter.

"Then," the headman said, cinching the bag shut, "I suppose the Nigitake we were going to give you as part of your reward can be replaced by *this*, right?"

"Wait! No! That's—!"

"Nonsense. It's a bit burnt, but Nigitake is Nigitake—as you said."

I slumped my shoulders in defeat.

Back in my room at the inn, I locked the door and grinned.

"Hehehe..."

I opened the bag. I had put the charcoal on top, but underneath... were perfectly roasted Nigitake! My Fireball had charred the outside ones in the golem's hollow belly, but many inside were perfectly cooked or even raw.

"Now! Tonight is a Nigitake party!"

The scent of autumn filled the small, shabby room.

(The Battle for Autumn Flavors: End)

Go For It, (Ex-)Necromancer!

"Miss Lina! Is that really you, Miss Lina!?"
I was suddenly hailed while stuffing my face with lunch at a tavern in a certain town. Turning toward the familiar voice, I saw a young girl I recognized. She looked about seventeen or eighteen. Her long silver hair was the same as ever, but her clothes were different—she was wearing the habit of a novice priestess.
"Winnie!?" I exclaimed.
You might remember her—a while back, there was an incident where undead were spawning aimlessly in massive numbers. The one behind it was none other than Winnie, who was a necromancer at the time. Granted, she didn't mean any harm... anyway, thanks to the efforts of myself and my traveling companion Naga (who has vanished to who-knows-where currently), the incident was resolved. I'd heard rumors she'd given up necromancy to start the path of a priestess at some temple.
"Is the place where you're training nearby?" I asked.
"Yes, it's just outside town at the foot of the mountain. I'm out on an errand today..."
"GYAAAAAARGH!?"
Several screams from outside the shop cut her off.
"What!?" I bolted upright. Where there's a commotion, there's a chance for profit. That is the law of nature.
"Zombies! Zombies are on a rampage!" a man yelled from outside. I heard Winnie catch her breath.
Something was up—but we couldn't talk calmly in this chaos. Time to settle things outside first. I dashed out with Winnie following close behind. Sure enough, five or six zombies were flipping over stalls and accosting passersby.
Alright! Let's wrap this up quick... Just as I started to chant:
"Purification Barrier!"
With those words of power, a wave of soft light spread out. The moment they were bathed in it, the zombies froze and crumbled into dust. It was a high-level purification spell. The caster was...
"Oh my. If it isn't Winnie? What a coincidence. Every single time."

A woman stepped through the crowd, her tone laced with thorns. She looked around twenty, golden curly hair, beautiful—but her eyes were sharp and nasty. She wore the same vestments as Winnie.
"...Miss Lufinia...!"
"Well, it's a good thing I happened to be here, otherwise this would have been a disaster. Honestly, I wonder why these things only happen since certain people arrived... At any rate, I'm glad you're safe. Hurry up and finish your errand! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"
After delivering her snide remarks and a laugh that reminded me of a certain someone, this "Lufinia" turned on her heel and left. Winnie just stood there, looking down in silence.
"Looks like there's a story here," I said quietly.

Back in the tavern over dessert, Winnie started to spill the details.
"Everything was fine for a while after I got here... but then, zombies and skeletons started appearing around the temple and town, causing trouble."
"The first time was about five days after I arrived. a novice woke up and went to the carrot patch behind the temple, only to find five or six zombies pulling up all the carrots."
"Zombies... and carrots?" I blinked.
"Yes... everyone drove them off with purification spells, but it's been happening almost every day since."
I leaned back. "That Lufinia girl was pretty harsh. Are you being suspected?"
"Actually... yes. Everyone knows I'm an ex-necromancer because I mentioned it during my self-introduction..."
Don't say things like that, kid.
"So Lufinia thinks you're the cause?"
"Yes. She arrived a year before me and she's amazing—she can use all sorts of purification spells freely. But... I think it's bad for this to keep happening! And I'm not doing it! Their skin tone and 'glow' are different from the ones I make!"
Skin tone and glow...? Well, she's the pro. If she says they're different, they probably are.
"It's not just that I'm being suspected," Winnie continued, "I feel sorry for the undead! Being manipulated into doing bad things only to be erased!"
"Wait... I thought you grew to hate undead?"
"I thought so too... that's why I started training as a priestess. But I was wrong! When the zombies were erased in front of me, I got so sad. I realized I don't hate them—I'm just still bad at handling them! Deep down, I still love them!"

"The way a zombie rots... the deep color of a skeleton that's been buried for just the right amount of time... even a ghoul's skin stains are wonderful..."
I stopped my fork halfway to my mouth. The smell of my meat pie suddenly felt very strong.
"I especially love zombies. That scent of a zombie drifting on the wind... a little sweet, a little sour—whenever I think of it, something hot wells up in my chest—"
"I think that's nausea," I noted accurately.
"It's not!" she shouted. "Please, Miss Lina! Help me find the real culprit! I don't have money, but I have know-how! I'll teach you my original technique for creating 'Stylish Zombies with a Knack for Improv'! You can sell that knowledge to the Mage Guild for a fortune!"
"Stylish zombies...?" I actually kind of wanted to see that. "Alright! I'll take the job!"
Winnie took me to the temple to meet the Vice High Priest, a handsome man in his mid-twenties named Saplus. He was currently running things because the High Priest, Kazef, was bedridden with illness.
"I know people suspect Winnie," Saplus said with a sigh. "But if an outsider—and a friend of hers—starts snooping around, it'll cause even more unrest. The High Priest is already worried sick."
"Which is why we should solve it fast!" I countered.
Suddenly, the door burst open. It was the golden-haired Lufinia. "Master Saplus! If you like, I shall throw this mage out myself! Why are you entertaining a low-class mage of unknown origin!?"
"Who are you calling low-class!?" I snapped. We traded barbs until Saplus sent her away. He eventually gave me permission to investigate, provided I didn't interfere with their training.
Of course, he neglected to mention that everything they do is part of their training. I was basically stuck.
That night, I was staying in a drafty attic in a detached building. I heard a sound.
Creak... creak...
Five zombies were coming up the stairs. I didn't want to just kill them; I wanted the summoner. I used Levitation to fly out the skylight and spotted a dark shadow lurking near the main building. I gave chase, but the shadow slipped through a back door and locked it.
Left with no choice, I blew up the zombies with a Fireball.
BOOM!
Naturally, the explosion woke everyone up. Lufinia was the first to start yelling.
"Firing fire magic in the middle of the night!? How typical of someone Winnie brought along! I bet you summoned them yourself just so you could look 'heroic' by defeating them!"

"I was attacked," I said coldly. The crowd started whispering.
"Is that so?" Lufinia sneered. "You don't look like an experienced mage. You have no dignity, no height, and no chest."
I'm going to kill her.
Saplus stepped in to scold Lufinia for causing more unrest, and everyone went back to bed. But I was frustrated—more so by Lufinia than by losing the culprit.
The next day, Winnie and I went to town. We ran into Lufinia again, who insulted us and left. Shortly after, skeletons appeared. I took them out with Elmekia Lance and then flew back to the temple at top speed.
Saplus was missing from his post.
Later that evening, during transcription time, I marched into the hall. "I know who the culprit is!"
Everyone froze. Lufinia scoffed. "Oh? Let me guess, more bluffing?"
"Every time undead appear, you happen to be nearby, Lufinia. And you have the talent to learn necromancy. So, the culprit is you—or so the real culprit wants us to think!"
"What?" Lufinia blinked.
"Isn't that right, Vice High Priest Saplus? Today, when the skeletons appeared in town, I saw your face in the crowd. And when I flew back here, you were nowhere to be found. You're trying to stress the High Priest to death so you can take his position!"
"Are you insane!?" Lufinia screamed, defending Saplus. "Master Saplus is a great man! He's destined to become High Priest and marry me!"
"Uh, that's not in the plans..." Saplus muttered.
Then, Lufinia pointed at Winnie. "It's obviously this undead girl! I bet she summoned them because she hates training here!"
"I did not!" Winnie cried. "Those undead were made so poorly! It's an insult to the undead!"
"What do you mean 'poorly'!? How rude!" Lufinia snapped.
...Wait.
"Why is that 'rude' to you, Lufinia?" I asked. "Winnie was insulting the creator."
Lufinia paled. Saplus then added, "Also, the night Lina was attacked, she only said she was 'attacked.' But you immediately asked if she 'summoned zombies.' How did you know they were zombies and not skeletons or ghouls?"
Lufinia was cornered. Saplus revealed he had been following her and saw her chanting.
"I just... I just didn't like Winnie!" Lufinia confessed.
Snap.
"ARE YOU KIDDING ME!?" I roared. "I built this whole elaborate mystery theory, and you confess because of a slip of the tongue over a petty grudge!?"
Lufinia kicked over a chair and bolted. We chased her to the graveyard.

In the graveyard, Lufinia summoned five zombies. "Get them!"
Saplus and the priests started chanting purification spells, but Lufinia kept summoning more. She was fast.
"Stop it, Miss Lufinia!" Winnie cried. "It's cruel to use zombies this way! Fine... I'll stop you myself!"
Winnie didn't use purification. She used Necromancy.
"Vampire Lord Mirage!" (Note: A specialized Winnie spell).
A zombie appeared. Unlike Lufinia's shamblers, this one was wearing a crisp black burial suit and moved with grace. It bowed to Winnie.
"Master. Your orders?" the zombie rasped with a yellow-toothed grin.
"Stop her! But don't be too rough!" Winnie commanded.
The stylish zombie blurred into motion. It ignored the other zombies (since it wasn't human) and grabbed Lufinia by the shoulders.
"Eek—!?"
And then... it gave her a massive, deep kiss.
The air turned white with frost. The world seemed to stop. Lufinia, hit by the most horrifying attack imaginable, promptly fainted.
After purifying the remaining zombies, we stood over the unconscious Lufinia.
"You're quite the schemer, Saplus," I noted. "Using me as bait."
"Well, I heard the rumors about you, Miss Inverse. I knew a few zombies wouldn't be a problem." He smiled.
Winnie stood with her stylish zombie. "I realized I don't fear them as much anymore. I want to become a priestess who creates a world where humans and undead can live together in harmony!"
"I'd... really rather you didn't," I muttered.
And so, the incident ended. I never did get paid in cash, and every Mage Guild I visited refused to buy the "Stylish Zombie" manual. Sigh.

(Go For It, Ex-Necromancer!: End)

Afterword

Author: Hey, long time no see! And so, here it is: *Slayers Special* Volume 7, *Go For It, Necromancer!*

L: ...What about Part 2 of the main series...?

Author: Well, hey! It's finally the New Year! Last year was busy with the game release and all, and it looks like this year is going to be pretty packed too. Oh, by the way, I'm writing this afterword under the assumption that you're reading this on New Year's Day, 1995, so keep that in mind!

L: ...So... Part 2 of the main series...?

Author: Well, you see, at the end of last year things got... a bit hectic. Just sending out New Year's cards was a whole ordeal!

L: ...Part 2 of the main series...

Author: ...I even had a friend in the neighborhood make an address list for me...

L: Part 2.

Author: .....

L: ——Well?

Author: I'M SORRYYYYYY! It's my fault! Uugh! I'll work hard on thinking of something!

L: Hmph. You should have just reflected on your actions honestly like that from the start.

Author: ——Anyway, now that I've had a nice, refreshing reflection session, let's get right into the various announcements!

L: ...He's definitely not reflecting at all... This author...

Author: Moving on! This year's New Year's card features the annual original illustration by yours truly, Hajime Kanzaka: the "S-sized Chibi Lord L-sama, with Bonus Subordinate S included!"

L: S-sized chibi? You... the nicknames get worse every year...

S: And what do you mean "Bonus me included"!? (Subordinate S looks at the New Year's card) AAAAAAGH! My treatment is always like this! (Note: He's playing the role of a snowman.)

L: ...Th-this treatment... no matter how you look at it... is far too appropriate...

S: ...*sniff sniff sob sob*...

Author: Well, it’s New Year's, so why not?

L: True. I mean, you have to consider it a huge promotion just to be included on a New Year's card! Isn't that great!?

S: Y-you think so...? *sniff sniff sob sob*...

L: Speaking of New Year's cards, Author, now that I think about it, you draw "younger version" versions of me quite a lot... Wait! Don't tell me Hajime Kanzaka is some kind of lolicon geezer!?

Author: No, it’s purely for artistic reasons. If I try to draw a full-body shot of someone with a 6-head or 7-head body scale, it won't fit inside the frame of a postcard.

L: ...That’s... actually kind of pathetic...

Author: Shut up! ...Anyway! Uh, regarding the fan letters I always receive from everyone—of course, I read all of them and enjoy them immensely... but the volume of letters has increased so much that I'm currently unable to write replies. I’m sorry. I try to at least send out New Year's cards, though...

L: *Tsk tsk tsk!* Isn't a man supposed to push through and write them anyway?

Author: You say that, but when the number of letters arriving per year exceeds four digits...

L: If you just write five a day, you can manage anything!

Author: You make "five a day" sound so easy... but when it comes to writing a reply, I have to read the person's letter, think about what kind of message to send back, figure out the composition on the postcard, sketch a rough doodle, ink it, color it, and write the message in the margins... doing all that, let alone five a day, even one or two is... it's just too much...

L: ...Why do you get so elaborate...? It's not like you're a craftsman...

Author: ...Well... I just can't help it... It’s human nature. When you see a blank piece of paper, you just want to doodle on it. It’s a sort of instinct.

L: Come to think of it, the only things you give to people that *don't* have doodles on them are envelopes or your manuscripts.

Author: Exactly. If I fill a postcard or stationery with just text, a voice in my head starts screaming: *"What's wrong with you?! Is this okay?! Who's going to be happy getting such a cold, unfriendly thing?! Doodles! You must doodle!"* And before I know it, I've set my manuscript aside and I'm doodling on a postcard.

L: ...Th-that sounds like a pretty big problem to me... With that attitude, are you sure you're going to come up with the story for Part 2 of the main series?

Author: Hmph. I'm struggling precisely because I *can't* come up with it.

L: DON'T ACT SO PROUD OF IT! ...But after this, you've got Volume 4 of *Lost Universe*, right? And the *Dragon Magazine* serialization, and then Part 2... ...Well... do your best, even if it kills you.

Author: Ah! Your tone is so cold!

L: I mean, in Part 2, I won't have any screen time except for the afterwords, right?

Author: ...If I don't write the main story, there won't be an afterword either...

L: Gasp! You might be right! In that case, how about just writing an entire book that's nothing but an afterword? With me as the protagonist, of course.

Author: ...What on earth am I supposed to write for an entire book...?

L: Well, you're the author—you figure it out. I'll leave it to you.

Author: ...Hey...

L: And on that note, we're out of time.

Author: WHEN DID WE AGREE ON THAT?!

L: Goodbye, everyone!

Author: Wait a minute! An entire book for an afterword...

(Subordinate S pulls down the curtain, cutting off the Author's voice. The Author's voice can be heard from behind the curtain for a short while. Eventually, there is a "thud" sound—then silence.)

(Afterword: End)